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**NEGOTIATING MELODRAMA**  
**AND THE MALAY WOMAN:**  
**Female Representation and the Melodramatic Mode in**  
**Malaysian-Malay Films from the Early 1990s - 2009**

By

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## ABSTRACT

Melodrama does not only point to a type of aesthetic practice but also to a way of viewing the world. This thesis is inspired by the idea proposed by Christine Gledhill (1988) that at the core of cultural negotiation in melodrama is gender representation which is the cultural product resulting from the linking of textual and social subjects. Central to this negotiation is the figure of the woman which has long functioned as a powerful and ambivalent expression of the male psyche. In the context of Malaysian cinema, film critics and reviewers tend to use the term ‘melodrama’ in the pejorative sense, usually referring to female-centred films. What is significantly comparable between Western and non-Western perceptions, however, is that melodrama is examined in terms of gender, class, and more recently, race and ethnicity. This thesis examines the construction of female protagonists, within the backdrop of both urban and rural settings, through the use of melodrama as an aesthetic mode in selected Malaysian-Malay films from the early 1990s to 2009. The general approach is the employment of textual analysis based on concepts of film melodrama and informed by contextual information and social history. Thematically, Malaysian-Malay films of the period between the early 1990s and 2009 that focus on female protagonists largely depict the woman in the capacity of independent-minded personas negotiating patriarchal rules in the pursuit of vocational, romantic, and sexual emancipation. This typology of female protagonists comprises the urban, the romantic and the sexual woman. The problematisation of the female protagonist in this manner reveals the dimensions of social change and defines the new role of women in Malaysia’s market economy from the 1990s to the new millennium.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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## INTRODUCTION

As a filmic genre, melodrama has been subjected to critical derision and is generally used today to refer to narrative elements that convey heightened emotionalism and sentimentality. The significance of melodrama's status is that it is not just a cinematic genre but also a mode with formative roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which rivals realism in its claim to establish popular cinema. The term 'melodrama' indicates 'a theatrical kind, a specific cinematic genre or a pervasive mode across popular culture' (Gledhill, 1987, p.1). The melodramatic mode both connects and competes with realism and tragedy, hence maintaining complex historical relations between them. Melodrama, therefore, does not only point to a type of aesthetic practice but also to a way of viewing the world. In terms of gender construction, melodrama reflects a 'value system' (Byars, 1991, p. 61) that constantly attempts at giving material existence to the repressed and historically functions as a major site of the political struggles for the disempowered. This research is inspired by the idea proposed by Christine Gledhill that at the core of cultural negotiation in melodrama is gender representation which is the cultural product resulting from the linking of textual and social subjects. Central to this negotiation and to this thesis is the figure of the woman which has long functioned as 'a powerful and ambivalent patriarchal symbol, heavily over-determined expression of the male psyche' (Gledhill, 1988, p. 76).

In the context of Malaysian cinema, film critics and reviewers tend to use the term 'melodrama' in the pejorative sense, usually referring to female-centred films. What is significantly comparable between Western and non-Western perceptions, however, is that melodrama is examined in terms of gender, class, and more recently, race and ethnicity. Shared between these seemingly different cultures is the melodramatic imagination that constructs films under Manichaeian terms of familial struggle and conflict, the strife against 'fate' and social injustice, and the extent to which social conditions determine characters' destinies before it is made clear that the vital effort is for individual identity within a familial context. William van der Heide (2006) suggests that it might be constructive to consider melodrama as a more encompassing generic style within which particular genres operate in contemporary Malaysian cinema. This notion is perhaps more palpable in Malaysian-Malay films up to the 1980s given its traditional melodrama influences from *bangsawan*, Indian cinema and classic Hollywood films. From the early 1990s onwards, however, a 'New Wave'

of artistic and innovative filmmakers such as Shuhaimi Baba, U-Wei Hj Shaari, and Aziz M. Osman have produced films that incorporate the melodramatic mode in a manner that reflects a more insightful awareness of the conflicts and distinguishing traits of Malay society and, in some cases, Malay women. The new millennium also saw a more diverse and optimistic attitude to the Malaysian film industry with the growth of digital technology and the emergence of new, independent filmmakers such as Yasmin Ahmad, Bernard Chauly and Osman Ali, for instance, who present socially, culturally and politically unique cinematic illustrations of women negotiating the trials posed within a patriarchal Malaysian context.

### **Research Method**

One of the potential challenges facing this research is the lack of familiarity with and interest in Malaysian films worldwide, and perhaps within Asia itself. There is also a possibility for Malaysian cinema to be regarded as somewhat inferior when compared to Western fare or to the more noted works of Japanese and Iranian cinema. The study of Asian cinema has also appeared to revolve mainly around Japanese, Indian and Chinese films. It must be emphasised, therefore, that while film scholarship in the West has recently been informed by Thai and Korean cinema, which has achieved recognition since the beginning of the new millennium, it has yet to be fully exposed and captivated by contemporary Malaysian filmmakers who have strived to further develop and elevate the status of Malaysian films since the early 1990s. The rationale behind this research, therefore, stems from the growing popularity of Malaysian films at various film festivals, the development of academic and critical writing on Malaysian cinema<sup>1</sup>, and the view that Malaysian films merit significant examination and acknowledgement if Asian cinema is to be more fully appreciated and understood. Women have, furthermore, played pivotal roles in Malaysian films as audience members, as protagonists, and more recently, as filmmakers.

Female protagonists in conventional Malay cinema, from its very early stages, are normally positioned in a homogenous Malay backdrop in which they are distinguished by the definite contrast between the traditional and subservient woman and the modern, Westernised woman who is chastised for her independence. In the 1980s, female representation in melodramas began to examine socio-economic and political developments, with the woman functioning as an allegory of the Mahathir era (Norman, 2005). In Malay cinema of the 1990s

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the more astute and well-acknowledged studies that have been published on Malaysian cinema are by William van der Heide, Khoo Gaik Cheng, and Timothy Barnard. Hassan Muthalib, the late Benjamin McKay, and Norman Yusoff are also some of the film scholars who have contributed constructive essays and commentaries on various internet sites.

and the new millennium, the melodramatic genre has undergone some transformation, as the issue of gender construction and Malaysian modernity are galvanized in new perspectives and discourses. The main objective of my research, therefore, is to examine the construction of female protagonists, within the backdrop of both urban and rural settings, through the use of melodrama as an aesthetic mode in selected Malay films from the early 1990s to 2009. My definition of melodrama as a mode and genre is presented in a review of related literature on melodrama and on the depiction of women in classic Hollywood films as well as Malay cinema. This establishes the historical and international line of affiliation of melodrama and also shapes the analysis method employed in this thesis.

My conceptual framework is therefore based on the review of theoretical writing presented in Chapter Two which describes the aesthetic features of melodrama identified in classic Hollywood cinema, as well as aspects of the melodramatic tradition and influences within Malay cinema. The framework also essentially draws from ideas posed by Christine Gledhill in her essay 'Pleasurable Negotiations' (1988) that relate to the construction of the heroine as an independent woman and/or as victim, which I describe in Chapter Three. In order to offer a more flexible approach to understanding the construction of female protagonists in Malay cinema, my analysis of the heroine also incorporates the examination of a typology of characters within the context of Western theory, and Malay melodrama, also presented in Chapter Three. The female protagonists are analysed in relation to the themes of modernity/emancipation, love, and sexuality according to both Hollywood and Malay cinematic traditions. The framework aims to demonstrate the following statements: I argue that the melodramatic mode is the key aspect of female representation in Malaysian-Malay films from the early 1990s to 2009. In addition, I suggest that melodrama is the most effective (affective) genre of Malay films because of its engagement with social issues for women which reflects mainstream cultural ambivalence about the role of Malay women in present-day Malaysia. As a popular mass cultural form, commercial Malay melodramas need to be acknowledged as a mode of focusing on individual psychology and human relationships through the effective use of emotive elements (often relinquishing ideology) which illustrate real-life scenarios that Malaysian audiences can relate to.

In order to achieve the objectives of this research, my general approach, therefore, is to employ textual analysis based on film melodrama and informed by contextual information and social history. Analysis of selected films in the second half of this thesis demonstrates textual reading of narrative strategies, image construction, aesthetic features and possible ideological positions related to female representation. This textual examination pays specific

attention to: the construction of female protagonists and instances which augment the heroine's portrayal through melodrama; and the depiction of motifs in the film which are particularly conveyed through elements of melodrama. Discussion includes thematic implications and how these reflect specific ideologies on the woman's position in the Malaysian context<sup>2</sup>.

The traditional and widely held psychoanalytic perspective of feminist film criticism will not, however, be actively utilised in the analysis method. Psychoanalytically informed feminist cultural studies have indeed been extremely influential in a multitude of areas, in the study of visual culture, including mothering, as well as sexual and gender identities. Psychoanalytic feminist film theorisation of the relationship between culture and gender has, nevertheless, been criticised for its propensity to universalise its assertions and ignore social and historical context, as well as its neglect of race and class as vital dynamics (Lury, 1995; Bernard, 1995; Wright, 1998). Even so, the notion of psychoanalytic insights is not altogether abandoned as the unconscious processes in understanding how patriarchal culture reproduces itself and why some visual images continue to have a strong appeal may be essential.

### **Film Selection<sup>3</sup>**

The scope of film selection for this research has focused on Malay films produced from the early 1990s to 2009. During this period, approximately 356 films from various genres were produced, including several not in the Malay language (English, Chinese dialect, or Tamil were used)<sup>4</sup>. 129 of these films are singularly categorised as 'drama' but countless more have been classified as 'drama'<sup>5</sup> with the additional tag of: romance (e.g. 'drama, romance'); family; action; comedy; history; musical; adventure; crime; horror; mystery; patriotic; and war. For this thesis, the selection process has been limited to a number of films in the Malay language that have been officially termed as primarily 'drama' as well as some that have been given additional genre descriptions. Most of the films that I have selected contain complex storylines which primarily focus on the female protagonist. In addition, I

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<sup>2</sup> I accept the argument that ideological textual analysis should 'deploy a wide range of methods to fully explicate each dimension and to show how they fit into textual systems' (Kellner, 1995, p. 98).

<sup>3</sup> Synopses of the films are given in Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> Source: 'Sinema Malaysia' ([www.sinemamalaysia.com.my](http://www.sinemamalaysia.com.my)) - a website that provides information on Malaysian films courtesy of the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS). The site provides information on films from the 1930s to present times.

<sup>5</sup> FINAS categorised 17 films as 'drama' in the period of 1990-1999 and 39 films in 2000-2009.

have selected a few films that have not been officially categorised as ‘drama’ per se, and films which have received less critical acclaim, in order to demonstrate the utilisation of the melodramatic mode in such films. The applicability of both Gledhill’s binary of independent heroine versus victim and the contrast between traditional/passive woman and modern/westernised woman in conventional Malay cinema is also the key reason for the film selection. What further motivates the choice is the issue of modernity, romantic love, female desire and sexuality, as well as family relationships that have emerged from the films, and how the melodramatic mode is used to convey these themes in a didactic and moralistic vein.

### **Summary of Chapters**

Following on from this overview of my thesis, the first chapter provides a brief account of the Malaysian scenario that serves as the backdrop to the films analysed in this research. The aim of this chapter is to provide a brief account of the socio-economic and cultural composition of Malaysia, focusing on economic systems, the position of Islam, and women’s rights that form a contextual base to the films discussed. I also provide an overview of the Malaysian film industry, in which the issues of national cinema, censorship, and the advent of independent films are outlined. This chapter does not, however, present a detailed analysis of Malaysia’s history and structures. Instead, the information is limited to details that illustrate the socio-historical and cultural identity of Malaysian-Malay cinema that are relevant to the films selected for this research.

In Chapter Two I focus on a range of critical responses to the subject of melodrama that influences the premise of this research. The organisation of my literature review is, therefore, dictated partly by the necessity for background information and partly by conceptual approaches, both Western and Malaysian. In this review of related literature, I highlight various critical opinions relating to feminist film criticism and melodrama that informs my conceptual framework. I also outline the filmic devices used to augment the conflicts and space that melodrama offers to female protagonists as victims of circumstance i.e. the functions of music, *mise en scène*, pathos, emotion, and excess. In addition, I discuss the influences of *bangsawan* and Indian cinema which have significantly shaped the melodramatic tradition within Malaysian cinema in order to establish several historical and contemporary signposts before describing the distinctive elements of melodrama in Malay films.

Chapter Three follows on from the review on melodrama to describe the image construction, aesthetic features and ideological stance pertaining to the female protagonist.

The chapter focuses on the Western theoretical perspective of melodrama's investment in the woman as a patriarchal representation of: the wife, mother, and working woman; the woman in love; and the sexual figure, and the concepts that Gledhill suggests in 'Pleasurable Negotiations' describing the binary of the heroine as independent woman and victim. The chapter also presents academic ideas on the portrayal of female protagonists in Malay cinema. Presenting an overview of the various ways in which both Western film theorists and scholars of Malay films have used melodrama in connection with cinematic portrayals of women is essential in order to place this thesis in the context of existing theory and prior research on female representation, as well as to show how this thesis is motivated.

Discussion of the selected films begins in Chapter Four which focuses on the depiction of the multifaceted, modern 'new woman' who no longer parallels the unsophisticated virtuous woman of classic Malay cinema but instead signifies the notion of modernity in the 1990s and the new millennium in films by Shuhaimi Baba, Yasmin Ahmad, and Osman Ali. This chapter describes various established ideas on the concept of Malaysian modernity before focusing on the films' portrayal of how the independent heroine negotiates her 'modern' assertiveness whilst upholding traditional values. Discussion focuses on how female protagonists are portrayed as expressions of the male psyche, or as melodramatic victims. Examination of the heroines highlights aesthetic or narrative elements that complicate the portrayal of their emancipation or agency. The argument in this chapter centres on how melodrama is employed to highlight the way in which the independent heroine negotiates her female role in the story, and how the heroine's portrayal is complicated by personal relationships and by patriarchal-imposed terms and challenges depicted in the film.

The films of the 1990s, as exemplified by the films of Shuhaimi Baba, project the urban, independent woman as a model of hybridised modernity, focused on profession, relationships, a productive, satisfactory lifestyle, and as a contributor to the community and to a rapidly industrialising country. The melodramatic mode is employed in these films to convey the essential equilibrium – the coexistence of Western and traditional principles in the modern woman – that defines the Malaysian conviction of preserving established customs but relinquishing patriarchal constraints. In the new millennium, the provocative layers in the films of the late Yasmin Ahmad and of Osman Ali illustrate the dilemma surrounding the issues of race relations and social deprivation. The emancipated women in these films are fervent heroines who seek to challenge patriarchal oppression and economic destitution (respectively) yet effectively negotiate precarious race relations (in Yasmin's films) as well as family relationships and modern temptations (Osman's film). The melodramatic mode evident



in these films points to the underlying dimensions of the urban woman's experiences and triumph over oppression to reveal the humanity that is a vital component for the realisation of a truly developed nation.

Chapter Five studies a variety of love stories by various filmmakers such as Yasmin Ahmad, Saw Teong Hin, Bernard Chauly, and Kabir Bhatia and discusses how melodrama connects to the love motif and how it is utilised in the portrayal of the romantic heroine. Analysis of the romantic heroine portrayals is partly based on elements of the love story suggested by Mary-Ann Doane (1987) which is explained in Chapter Three. These include elements of repetition (object, music, and scenery), the sense of prolonged time and the heroine's act of waiting, the heroine's dilemma over making choices, as well as indications of the heroine's desire. As in the other film analysis chapters, discussion focuses on canonical filmic aspects of melodrama such as: musical accompaniment and its emotional effects; the *mise en scène* that explicitly depicts emotions and conflicts that the film's narrative and characters cannot express; the significance of pathos and how it functions through point of view and knowledge between characters; and the element of excess in the melodramatic image. In Malay cinema, the independent female persona who functions as a woman in love generally influences narrative progression by virtue of her emotionally-motivated actions. The romantic heroines in the films discussed here are poised in their ability to negotiate patriarchal constraints as well as emotional and social quandaries. The extensive use of the melodramatic mode in these love stories functions as a tool to project sentimentality and generate emotions that underpin the conflicts faced by the independent woman in her attempt to fulfil her emotive desires to overcome racial, class and gender obstacles. The chapter argues that the conflicts faced by the heroines' in their relationships fit into the melodramatic framework. Analysis of the films examines the struggles of the female protagonists as a love interests and how they negotiate the dictates of male authority figures and, by extension, wider (traditional/patriarchal) society.

In Chapter Six I examine how the melodramatic framework contributes to the depiction of the highly sexualised or fallen woman who drifts away from the family domain and upsets patriarchal order in several films by U-Wei Hj Shaari, and by Nazir Jamaluddin. Discussion highlights the complexities posed by the unscrupulous female protagonist (in contrast to the moral female character) and how the films negotiate female wayward and troublesome behaviour via melodramatic tropes. The chapter also highlights sympathy or ambivalence in the film's treatment of these female protagonists. This involves focus on the *mise en scène* utilised in the projection of precarious characteristics such as female

sexuality/desire, wickedness, and other morally depraved qualities, as well as the perceptions of these negative traits by other characters in the narrative. Discussion also focuses on how the notion of the sexual woman is made problematic by narrative development when the female protagonist attempts redemption, and how the film negotiates the *dénouement*. The melodramatic tropes in these films reveal the impact of the woman's sexuality on her immediate surrounding and clearly suggest that such defiant female characters are normally punished for their transgression. Melodrama becomes a distinct tool to subvert any desires, negotiations and sexual agency in the woman and corresponds with classic Malay cinematic tradition which has always admonished women for their moral and sexual transgressions. By punishing the deviant female protagonist, male authority and gender limitations are reinforced to ensure the cultural survival of the Malay community experiencing rapid modernisation.

In the final chapter I highlight the more prominent findings of my analyses and briefly reflect on my research limitations and the value of applying Western theoretical concepts to Malay films. The critical power of melodrama has always resided, to a large extent, not in its plot structure so much as in its *mise en scène*. My reading of the films focuses on aspects of melodrama's Manichean viewpoint: binary division of good and evil; vice and virtue; purity and treachery; as well as the utilisation of aesthetic elements such as setting, excess, and music. The films analysed for this thesis by and large reveal that melodramatic tropes contribute to the depiction of the female protagonists and various themes and is used mainly to evoke emotions. The use of the melodramatic mode is evident in excessive gestures and events, as well as in poignant moments, that portray the protagonists' reaction to an incident, and that indicate the element of fate and destiny that governs the flow of a narrative. The conflicts between vice and virtue are illustrated through the portrayal of female figures signifying various motifs that present these characters as independent women and/or victims of villains and circumstances (usually patriarchy). Pathos is generated for the audience and the other characters who witness the suffering of virtuous protagonists which leads to the creation of the melodramatic emotion – a definitive feature of film melodrama in any form (e.g. romances, action thrillers, and costume drama).

Thematically, the films of the period between the early 1990s and 2009 that focus on female protagonists largely depict the woman in the capacity of independent-minded personas negotiating patriarchal rules in the pursuit of vocational, romantic, and sexual emancipation. This typology of female protagonists, as stated above, comprises the urban, the romantic and the sexual woman. The strength of the urban heroine is portrayed in her resilience and fortitude. These female protagonists are victorious when they uphold morals and truths, and

are deferential to the balance between tradition and modernity whilst in pursuit of personal accomplishments and pleasures. The power of the romantic heroine, however, is conveyed through her overwhelming emotions which dictate her actions. The triumphs of these heroines are illustrated in their compelling sentiments as elements that motivate the narrative and generate pathos. The force of the sexual heroine, on the other hand, is expressed in her sensuality and the threat that she poses to male control. The films illustrate how female sexual agency which opposes patriarchal boundaries defies established societal norms and how patriarchal structures that empower men always re-establish their hegemonic control. Female protagonists who transgress are usually punished in a melodramatic manner. More significantly, however, the narrative structure surrounding the heroine (as the urban woman, the woman in love, and the fallen woman) draws attention to authentic issues pertaining to women, particularly in relation to patriarchy. The problematisation of the female protagonist in this way reveals the dimensions of social change and defines the new role of women in Malaysia's market economy from the 1990s to the post-Mahathir period. The films, particularly those by female filmmakers, favour the female perspective and illustrate the narrative through an expansion of moral and emotional consequences represented by the dilemmas and illuminating resolutions experienced by the heroine. The majority of the films place the female protagonist at the crux of the narrative negotiating emotional, familial, and social conflicts particularly connected to the fact that she is a woman. For the most part, the family is essentially the place where the attributes of the female protagonist are formed or linked to through the bonds of duty, love and conflict.

What emerges from my research is that there is much room for scholarly work into the ways in which a melodramatic sensibility inflects cinema in the Asian realm. This research is hopefully an example, indicating a possible direction for future investigations. Although feminist film critics regard melodrama as a genre that offers a large space to female protagonists and feminine concerns, melodrama is ultimately concerned with drawing attention to moral values and establishing moral right. More significantly, as Gledhill points out, melodrama generates a diversity of genres and draws other modes into its process of expression. This is the principle that persuades my research to examine Malaysian-Malay films that employ the melodramatic mode in its depiction of the woman and present these films not only as visual pleasure but as an attempt to showcase the distinctive qualities of Malay cinema.

## Chapter 1

### THE MALAYSIAN SCENARIO

The aim in this chapter is to provide a brief account of the Malaysian scenario that functions as the contextual base of this research. The first half of the chapter describes elements that illustrate the socio-economic and cultural structure within Malaysia, which includes matters pertaining to economic schemes, the role of Islam, as well as women's rights. The second part of this chapter deals with the circumstances surrounding the Malaysian film industry, including the issue of national cinema, censorship policies, and the emergence of independent Malaysian filmmakers. My discussion does not, however, present a comprehensive analysis of Malaysia's history and structures. Instead, the information is limited to details that generally illustrate the socio-historical identity of Malaysia, as well as its film industry, in relation to contextual issues like national policies, heritage, and culture.

Malaysia is strategically placed at the crossroads of South-East Asia between the great civilizations of China and India, and has long been exposed to a rich variety of influences that have helped to shape the local culture. Due to geographic location and historical consequence, Malaysia is a country and society that is criss-crossed by lines of connectedness as a result of trade, colonialism and migration. The effects of these interactions are evident in Malaysia's political, religious and socio-cultural configuration. Non-Malays, who largely migrated to Malaysia from the second-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, are an integral part of Malaysian society and have contributed significantly to the country's development. Malaysia's post-independence<sup>6</sup> transformation saw the new middle class operating across economic, political, social, cultural, and religious spaces, and negotiate new ways of ethno-religious interaction in society. Although rudiments of the middle-classes were already present under British colonialism, their expansion is closely linked to industrialisation and modernisation in post-independence Malaysia, prompted by rapid capitalist development and increase of a strong 'developmentalist state' (Abdul Rahman, 2001, p. 61). In relation to the status of women in Malaysia, much progress has been achieved since Malaysian Independence in narrowing the gender gap. This is reflected in the developments in women's roles, both in absolute and relative terms, in the major socio-economic aspects of the country's development, in productive activities of women and their strengthened economic standing, their increased

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<sup>6</sup> Malaysia (Malaya) attained independence from the British in 1957.

participation in education, and their improved health status (Abdullah et al, 2008). Generally, Malaysia's impressive economic growth has been accompanied by the greater participation of women in the formal workforce and in a range of other activities (Aminah, 1998).

### **Socio-economic and Cultural Structure**

By the early 1990s, Malaysia was shaking off its developing nation status and was emerging as a strong regional 'tiger economy'. Strong economic growth sparked rapid urbanisation and whole-scale migration of people from the rural areas to the cities in order to fulfil the needs of a burgeoning manufacturing sector. The current state of modernisation and urbanisation has resulted from what some consider as being the success of the National Economic Policy (NEP) implemented in 1971 following race riots between Malays and Chinese on May 13, 1969. The NEP was put into action based on the premise that economic inequality between the Chinese and the Malays was the main cause of the riots. Its objective was to redistribute the wealth that was then mostly in the hands of the Chinese and foreigners and ensure that the indigenous Malays enjoyed a far greater slice of the economic pie. The success of the NEP is suggested by the emergence of a wealthy and increasingly more sophisticated urban Malay middle-class who have benefited from higher education at both local and foreign universities. Modernisation has also enhanced the awareness of issues pertaining to civil liberties, women's rights, sexuality, and AIDS.

During the implementation of the NEP, Malaysia was hurled into full-scale industrialisation and this greatly improved the economic status of the Malays. Despite the fact that urbanisation and modernisation had commenced under British rule during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the majority of Malays continued to be peasants and fishermen in rural areas, far from the major towns whose economies were monopolised by Chinese tradesmen. The NEP aimed to dispose of the colonial practice of divide and conquer by removing the identification of ethnicity with economic function for purposes of classification. For instance, Malays were typically farmers and fishermen, Chinese were middlemen or tin miners, and Indians were rubber tappers. Recognising that Malay socio-economic dissatisfaction and Chinese political and economic dominance had led to the 1969 riots, the NEP aimed to improve the plight of the Malays by modernising them.

Abdul Rahman Embong (2001) suggests that the affirmative action programmes of the NEP (1971-1990) played a critical role in the formation of the new Malay middle-class. These policies also provoked several responses from non-Malay citizens (particularly the Chinese) which included silent acceptance, practical adjustment, as well as open resentment

seen clearly in the migration of Chinese capital and professional manpower out-with the country. Abdul Rahman's research also finds that long term NEP policies have not, however, diminished the capitalist and middle-classes among other Malaysians, least of all among the Chinese. This is due to the market-friendly nature of the Malay dominated state which actively promoted market growth even while implementing the NEP's programmes. Robust capitalist growth has allowed the economically stronger Chinese community to expand its new middle-class as well. Since the late 1980s, economic growth and the state's liberalisation of education and cultural policies, greatly easing restrictions on non-Malay access to higher education, have combined to encourage the return of many Chinese professionals who earlier migrated from Malaysia. This has in turn led to a new spirit of cooperation and acceptance across ethnic divides. Unlike the pre-1970s period, the contemporary Malaysian middle-class is a multi-ethnic structure. The 'cultural dynamic' of the new middle-class has produced a multitude of 'adaptations, innovations, and resistances' (Abdul Rahman, 2001, p. 63).

Industrialisation and market changes in Malaysia have created new public spheres resulting in greater interaction among Malaysians from various ethnic groups. Economic expansion and the growth of the new middle-class have also influenced personal values and practices. Abdul Rahman argues that this new 'developmentalist' ideology (Francis Loh, 2002) de-emphasises ethnicity while highlighting development and growth. It pushes individuals toward consumerism while distancing them from politics, especially any that might be critical of the state. This ideology has played a major role in generating continuing support for the ruling political coalition Barisan National (BN)/National Front since the 1980s. The ruling alliance is dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), but includes Chinese (Malaysian Chinese Association, MCA), Indian (Malaysian Indian Congress, MIC), and other alliance political parties. This 'developmentalist' ideology, therefore, has not obscured ethnicity but has instead partly 'privatised' it (Abdul Rahman, 2001, p. 64).

Abdul Rahman's research also finds that the new middle-classes have brought about new forms of association, self-expression, and enterprise, as well as new ideas regarding the proper balance among state, market, and civil society – creating a new kind of political culture in Malaysia. The increase of a multi-ethnic middle class has been accompanied by a proliferation of non-governmental institutions (NGOs), as well as new types of mass media, particularly accessed via the Internet. The new NGOs and media have also responded in various ways to the strengthening of the state and market expansion. Some of the causes they have observed include demands for human rights, rights for women and children,

programmes for the elderly and the minorities, consumer rights, and environmental protection. The introduction of these civic organisations together with democratic political parties and public intellectuals have contributed toward the increase of a more democratic public sphere giving rise to new solidarities that cross ethnic and religious boundaries. Described by analysts as ‘neither authoritarian nor democratic’ (Crouch 1996 quoted in Abdul Rahman, 2001), the state has shown a largely ambivalent attitude toward these developments. It has encouraged some NGOs, while shunning some others.

### **Malay Identity**

The term ‘Malay’ is considered a cultural and an ethnic description. Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution defines ‘a Malay’ as a Malaysian citizen born to Malaysian parents who profess to be Muslim, habitually speak Malay, adhere to Malay customs, and domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore. As a result, Malay citizens who convert from Islam are no longer considered Malay under the law. Hence, the special privileges afforded to Malays under Article 153 of the Constitution, the NEP, etc. are removed from such converts. Likewise, non-Malay Malaysians who convert to Islam can lay claim to these privileges if they meet certain conditions. An attempt to understand the Malay identity requires a glimpse into several significant aspects of Malaysian social and cultural history.

In general, Malays trace their roots back to the Melaka Empire, regarded as the axis of Malay civilization. Enclosed more in myth and legend, the Melaka Empire is chronicled in various literary epics and *Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals)*. It is highly likely, however, that the population of Melaka in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was more heterogeneous than many realise (Khoo, 2006). This is due to the fact that Melaka was a trading hub where traders from India and the Middle East came to conduct business with merchants from China. This notion of a Malay golden age is important for it was followed by over four hundred years of colonial rule (Portuguese, Dutch and British) and later, economic competition from hardworking immigrant races (Chinese and Indian). Ethnicity is also an unavoidable topic that proved to be a national turning point in Malaysian history with the race riots of May 13, 1969. Reminiscent of the Malayan Union proposal in 1946, which allocated equal Malayan citizenship to all immigrants, the incident, commonly referred to as ‘May 13’, stirred up Malay nationalist sentiments. This resulted in the creation of the *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) concept under the protection of the NEP and designed to reassert Malay rights and privileges over the Chinese, Indians, and other minorities in all areas. The term *bumiputera* generally refers to the Malays but it also includes several other indigenous groups. For Malay nationalists, economic

equality was the main incentive behind the NEP. During the colonial period and before the implementation of the NEP, there had already been a general consensus among divisions within the Malay nationalist movement that the three principles of 'Malayness' would comprise the Malay language, the Islamic religion, and loyalty to sultans and other chiefs of states. Furthermore, although another one of the NEP's general goals was to eradicate poverty across all ethnicities, this unfortunately was not completely attained and the Tamils, who constitute the majority of Malaysia's ethnic Indian population, have become the most underprivileged minority group today.

Maila Stivens' research (1998) on the Malay middle-class finds that in the 1970s and 1980s many rural Malays migrated to urban areas in search of jobs in the manufacturing sector. Owing to modernisation and pro-Malay economic policies under the NEP, a significant number of Malays with rural roots established themselves in urban and suburban areas and became part of the new urban Malay middle-class. The depiction of the rural setting dichotomy is one way for Malay films to stress the non-Western difference. It reveals Malay pride in ethnic identity which is connected to the *kampung* (village), even though many Malays work in the city, participate in everyday urban activity, and even regard themselves as modern Malays. More importantly, the rural-urban dichotomy does not automatically eclipse class differences, nor does it correspond smoothly to the 'urban middle class versus rural poor' juxtaposition (Stivens, 1998, p. 98). A large number of new urban middle-class Malays, for instance, comes from the rural middle-class that includes local officials, teachers, police officers, and small entrepreneurs. Unlike the earlier Malay middle-class, which consisted largely of administrators and schoolteachers, the new group consists primarily of managers and professionals working in both the private and government sectors. This new class is a major presence in Malaysian cities and towns.

Abdul Rahman's study (2001) of pluralism in Malaysia finds that since the 1970s onwards, linguistic, cultural, educational, and artistic spheres in Malaysia have shown new pluralist images and values. In educational institutions, for example, Malaysian children of various ethnic and religious backgrounds study alongside each other in national schools using Malay as the common language. Remarkably, a growing number of non-Chinese children have been attending Chinese schools since the 1990s. In addition, tertiary institutions using English as the medium of instruction have also emerged since the late 1980s, enrolling students (the majority of whom are non-Malays) who cannot secure places in the limited number of public institutions. On the cultural front, there has been growth of ethnic expressions in the form of dance, song, and other artistic modes (poetry, theatre, short



stories). These developments have been partly influenced by the Malaysian government's policy in promoting tourism, but they have attracted an interest considerably beyond state programmes.

In 1991 the NEP was replaced by a similar plan called the National Development Policy or NDP. The post NEP era sees the Malay middle-class and elite more comfortable speaking in English rather than in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), the official national language. Bahasa Malaysia was relegated to being the language of bureaucracy and, while state policies encouraged the use of Bahasa Malaysia as the official language, political leaders sent their children abroad for further education in English medium institutes of higher learning (Sumit Mandal 2000, cited by Khoo, 2006, p. 15). The use of English, however, never really disappeared among the political elite, who even published their books in English. Until today, the use of English continues to give the impression that Malaysia is a modern, progressive and liberal nation that is part of the global community. Furthermore, English has also been used as the medium of instruction in certain subjects in local universities since the early 1990s – in acknowledgement of its importance as the language of international trade. In 1996, new laws allowed English to be used in private colleges and since 2003 Mathematics and science-based subjects have been taught in English.

In 1971 the Malaysian government introduced a National Cultural Policy that identified Malay culture as the official one and which encouraged cultural integration of the immigrant races with the region's culture (Daniels, 2005). This ensured the preservation and authority of the Malay language, Islam, and the monarchy as head of Malay custom. Traditionally, Malay feudal cultural identity required complete loyalty to the sultan who was regarded as possessing divine powers (*daulat*), as 'the shadow of Allah on earth'. This meant that the sultan had a mystical power to punish those who flouted customs traditionally associated with Malay rituals and conventions. Western education and globalisation have slowly diluted this belief in divine kingship. More importantly, the establishment of a constitutional monarch and parliamentary rule after Malaysian Independence in 1957 eventually resulted in political power residing with the ruling multi-national coalition, the Barisan Nasional, anchored by UMNO. It has been mainly to UMNO that Malays today look for political guidance and protection of their socio-economic and cultural rights. The monarch and sultans, nevertheless, have maintained their ceremonial positions as the heads of custom and Islam, thus becoming more important as symbols of tradition than of authority. During the 1990s, however, the National Cultural Policy was rejected by Prime Minister Mahathir

Mohamed who introduced a ‘Bangsa<sup>7</sup> Malaysia’ policy to create an inclusive national identity for all inhabitants of Malaysia, thus abandoning a Malay ethnic identity for the state (Ooi, 2006). This concept is by no means an uncontested one either. The very notion of one Bangsa Malaysia has generated a vital and healthy debate regarding the various possibilities of building such an entity, with one scholar suggesting that ‘assimilationists prefer a homogeneous bangsa Malaysia; accommodationists prefer a plural one’ (Shamsul, 1996, p. 366).

### **Islam, Malay Custom, and Society**

The religious aspect of Malay identity – the experience of Islam since the colonial period – is an ‘ethnic identifier’ (Shamsul 1995) for the Malays. Islam and local Malay custom (*adat*) are at the core of Malay identity and exist in a complementary fashion. Arabic in origin, the term *adat* is used to describe local Malay customs or customary laws that existed prior to the arrival of Islam. Among such traditions are ‘bilateralism in gender relations, openness about sexuality and sensuality, and belief in magical healing and mysticism’ (Nagata, 1986, p. 42). Many facets of Malay custom, although patriarchal, are considered traditionally tolerant and more receptive towards sensual and sexual matters than resurgent Islam is. This aspect of *adat* is also connected with secularism, which has resulted from modernisation. *Adat* also advocates women’s power and autonomy and, therefore, continues to function in Malaysia as ‘a system of “checks and balances” between incompatible or conflicting ideological systems which culturally determine the distribution of power and responsibility between the sexes’ (Wazir, 1992, p. 230).

Michael Peletz (1995) suggests that *adat* in itself defines gendered spaces. An interesting challenge would be the view that *adat* and modernity are mutually exclusive and signify opposing spheres of East versus West. Wazir Jahan Karim (1992) argues that there are differences between *adat* and Islam in that one encourages gender bilateralism and the other stresses patriarchal aspects as advocated by state discourse. Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006), however, argues that in the modern constructions of culture by Malaysian filmmakers, *adat* is not impervious to patriarchal interpretations. In reality, patriarchy responds through various channels like the secular discourse of nationalism and the nation-state, through the conservative interpretations of Islam as propagated by the Islamic opposition political party PAS (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party) and certain fringe Muslim religious movements.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘bangsa’ literally means ‘race’.

Although many are inclined to view *adat* and Islam as binary yet complementary forces, in some cases, telling them apart may become complicated since Islam has become such a vital part of Malay culture and vice versa. The importance of *adat* was reduced to the domain of the local, mundane, tangible, and private while Islam revealed humankind's more abstract concern with salvation, the hereafter, unity, and justice (Nagata, 1986, pp. 42-43). In contrast to 'syncretic Islam' which accepts *adat* without reservation, scriptural Islam is more tentative towards *adat* and places it at an inferior status (Khoo, 2006, pp. 6-7). Khoo finds that the dynamics between scriptural and syncretic Islam concerning *adat* is depicted in cinematic discourse, as in films like Erma Fatima's *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (1999), in which the female protagonist faces the dilemma of choosing between her religious fundamentalist fiancé and a Westernised Malay theatre director. This film encapsulates the issue of gendered representation of *adat* that is trapped between Westernised modernity and resurgent Islam.

The effect of the contemporary version of scriptural Islam on Malaysian filmmakers is evident in films like Shuhaimi Baba's *Selubung* (1992). The narrative in *Selubung* refers to a form of radical Islam which culminated in the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979. Malay students sent abroad to study under the auspices of the NEP experienced the call of Muslim solidarity while overseas and returned to preach (*dakwah*) a more conservative version of Islam (Nagata, 1997, pp. 83-84). The *dakwah* movement began as early as 1969 and from the mid-1970s until 1990 radicalised students preached in universities and even villages (Nagata, 1986). During the 1990s, the Malaysian government implemented a liberal position to restore confidence in non-Muslim Malaysians and foreigners that its Islamic policies would not hinder trade and investment. By the late 1980s, however, most female Muslim secondary school pupils and university students began to put on the head scarf (*hijab*). Hence, the most obvious manifestation of Islam in the 1990s was Arab-influenced, scriptural practice of Islam which contrasted with the practice of the more localised Islam that had co-existed with other spiritual practices in Malaysia since the arrival of Islam in the Malay Archipelago in the fifteenth century. The objective of living the Islamic way of life, as implemented by local Islamic groups, exposes the paradoxes and compromises of traditional Islamic practice in Malaysia. This is because Islam came into the Malay Peninsula through the process of the Malay judicial system adopting Islam without totally undermining customary laws (Maznah, 1994, p. 127).

Since the mid-1980s, the religious sphere in Malaysia has also seen the development of the major denominations of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and others (Ackerman

and Lee, 1997; Sharifah Zaleha, 1997). Some of these religious movements, particularly the Islamic groups, have reacted against Westernising modernisation and globalisation (Beyer 1994), and have significantly influenced state policies, as well as ethnic relations. Some Islamist groups have even developed alternative institutions, such as Islamic educational institutions and medical centres. The ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), especially its dominant partner UMNO, have responded to the Islamic upsurge by repositioning itself on Islam. Calling themselves moderates and Islamic modernists, BN leaders instituted their own Islamisation policies, including the establishment of an Islamic banking system, streamlining the administration of Islam, and setting up the International Islamic University (Abdul Rahman, 2001). This has resulted in the rising influence of religious ideas and authority over Malaysian society.

On the political front, the move in 1982 of Anwar Ibrahim, the charismatic leader of the Islamic youth movement, into UMNO and the BN government was an attempt to neutralize the wave of Islamic resurgence directed by UMNO's opponent PAS which advocates the establishment of an Islamic state (Zainah, 2001). The sacking of Anwar in 1998, however, and the subsequent growth of the *reformasi* (reformation) movement with the support of all the major opposition parties and many NGOs has turned the Islamic surge against UMNO. In the 1999 elections, PAS succeeded in retaining its control over the state of Kelantan while also taking over the neighbouring state of Terengganu. PAS, additionally, trebled its representation in the Malaysian parliament became the major opposition party. For the first time in its political history, Malaysia had both a Malay-dominated government and opposition. The complex multi-cultural configuration in Malaysia opens up spaces for cooperation and tolerance, as well as conflict among different groups in society. While some members of the middle class have taken advantage of diversities in ethnicity, religion, language, and culture to sharpen social divisions, others have used them to develop pluralist tolerance.

### **Women's Rights**

In Malaysia, changes in the economic and political sector have reshaped the spaces within which women can act politically as gendered agents. The late 1990s has seen a more proactive push by women's organisations, resulting in a move from activism to political empowerment (Martinez, 2000). The issue of women's rights in contemporary Southeast Asia can be regarded as a sensitive matter. For women negotiating with authoritarian states, 'the state and civil society [sic] are both complex terrains: fractured, oppressive, threatening [but]

also providing spaces for struggle and negotiation' (Shirin Rai, 1996, p. 32). Islamic discourse in Malaysia has also become a powerful site of political contest and a medium for forms of social protest (Kessler, 1978) and is a continuing force for understanding women's negotiations with and within late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysian state and society.

Malaysian women 'scholar-activists'<sup>8</sup> have made a number of explorations into the connection between feminist theory and practice and their own position within global feminisms and local Malaysian activism. A special issue of the journal *Kajian Malaysia* focusing on 'Feminism in Malaysia' recorded a vast avoidance of the term 'feminist' by Malaysian women activists (Maznah and Wong, 1994). Norani Othman (a prominent member of Sisters in Islam<sup>9</sup>) has argued for the term 'womanist'. The reason for this distancing has included a series of factors which include a post-colonial circumspection of the 'alien' agendas of feminism(s), which has often been seen as the product of Western neo-colonial civilising missions (Mohanty et al, 1991); misgivings about the supposed emphasis on sexuality in 'Western' feminisms, which is often equated with anarchic sexual libertinism (Lai, 1999); and a strategic move within a difficult political climate – whereby the tense relationship with a repressive state, and the processes of self-censorship have succeeded in suppressing the 'too radical' in the carefully-orchestrated delicate negotiations with and within the state (Netto, 1999).

These conflicts have emerged linguistically around the term 'woman' and/or 'gender'. Many women's organisations in Malaysia have adopted the term '*wanita*' for 'women', often producing neologisms such as *Tenaganita* (an organisation working for women workers' rights, which combines the words *tenaga* [labour] and *wanita*) and *Puspanita* (a civil servant's organisation). The struggle over the meaning of 'woman' is also linked to the continuing dispute about what is understood by women's 'interests'. Such disagreements have been deeply embedded within the cultural politics of identity, ethnicity, nationalism, and the state's Islamic modernity project (Stivens, 2003). Women activists negotiating the complex Malaysian political backdrop have experienced particular problems when challenging the continuing 'ethnicisation' of Malaysian politics. The activists also have to deal with a complex body of ideas about the Asian 'modern' that profoundly implicate 'gender'. These

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<sup>8</sup> Term suggested by Reynaldo Ileto in Milner and Morris-Suzuki, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> *Sisters in Islam* (SIS) is an organization of Muslim women which aims to articulate women's rights in Islam by stressing on the need to interpret the Quran and the Hadith within their proper historical and cultural contexts. It also advocates for the right of women to hold public office.

include cultural contests about women's bodies and behaviour, which explicitly locate the 'too modern' woman as 'Western' (Ong, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Mayer, 2000) and ideas about 'Asian values' and the 'Asian family' which thrived in the years leading to the 1997 economic turmoil (Kessler, 1999). Such disputes have been particularly intense for Malay women, who have had to negotiate a politicised Islam within the continual Islamisation of Malaysian society, but have had an equally powerful if less obvious impact on women of other ethnicities.

Women's organisations in colonial Malaya and independent Malaysia have long strived for political change especially in anti-colonial nationalist struggles, within women's section of political parties, and in a charitable capacity in campaigns for women's health and education, and on marriage and polygamy (Ng and Chee, 1996 quoted in Stivens, 2003). Many of these organisations highly depended on state patronage (Tan and Bishan Singh, 1994 quoted in Stivens, 2003). The development of a global feminist public around the United Nations Decade for Women and the world conferences on women from the mid-1970s motivated considerable interest in feminism in Malaysia. By the mid-1980s, Malaysian women were joining women across Southeast Asia in campaigning against issues such as sexual assault and domestic violence and setting up a range of Women's Crisis Centres (Lai, 1999). A growing number of women's groups emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s and lobbied more ambitiously and proactively for policy change and action at the national and international levels. The mid-1990s also saw attempts by women's organisations to expand the issues of concern to include land, the environment, domestic workers' rights, sex workers, sexual harassment, and the broad issues of human rights, democracy and corruption (Lai, 1999). A particular achievement has been the concerted campaign for a Domestic Violence Act, finally resulting in its official endorsement in 1994. In 1999, a number of women's groups presented the Women's Agenda for Change (WAC) to the government to obtain its commitment to women. WAC represents a coalition of women's groups derived from all the major Malaysian ethnic groups and their respective organisations, including Jamaah Islah Malaysia (*Wanita JIM*), a Muslim women's organisation; Sisters In Islam, a reformist women's group working for women's rights within Islam; All Women's Action Society (AWAM); Malaysian Trade Union Congress (women's section); and several others.

In relation to women's organisations, the most politicised and politically active group of women in Malaysia has always been the Malay Muslims (Wan Azizah, 2002). Historically, Malay women have been known to actively participate and contribute to the political realm in the Malay Archipelago. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the state of Kelantan was governed by a female

ruler – Che Siti Wan Kembang. In the wider Malay Archipelago, the kingdom of Aceh (Sumatra) was also ruled by a succession of Malay women, as were the islands of Maluku and Sulawesi. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim reformers like Syed Sheikh Al Hadi and his contemporaries in the progressive Islamic movement –popularly known as *Kaum Muda* – advocated the notion for Malay Muslim girls to obtain modern education along with the boys (Ahmad et al, 1992). Although such ideas initially encountered some opposition from the more conservative-minded, Malay Muslim society in general, prior to Independence, adopted this liberal attitude towards its women which therefore encouraged education and the participation of women in the public sphere (Zanariah, 2007). Since Independence the country has seen a number of women in politics, the civil service and the corporate sector who have attained senior positions<sup>10</sup>.

Islam has undeniably been, for the longest time, a symbol of religious and cultural identity for the Malays. Zanariah Noor's research (2007) on gender justice in Malaysia finds that reformists' approaches using Islamic principles contributed greatly toward women's education (both religious and secular education in English schools) and their views on women's status and roles in society from an Islamic point of view became a stimulus for changing perceptions towards women. The dominant idea of the superiority of male over female in Malay society, however, was regarded as the norm and had never been questioned until the early twentieth century by reformist scholars<sup>11</sup>. The primary role of men within the context of the family is that of providers, while women under normal circumstances manage domestic affairs and the raising of children. Zanariah also suggests that unequal treatment of women was perceived as normal, and was not questioned culturally and religiously. Literal understanding of religious teachings in the classical *fiqh*<sup>12</sup> books which had been referred to throughout centuries appeared to strengthen the notion of the inferiority of women. The domestic role of women as wives and mothers was emphasised and women were reminded to obey their husbands and not breach the rights of their husbands. Husbands were, at the same

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<sup>10</sup> The first Malaysian woman to become a minister was Fatimah Haji Hashim, who was appointed to be Minister for Welfare by the country's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. Since then, women have been assigned either to ministries seen as "suitable" to their roles, such as the Ministry of Welfare or the Ministry of Women and Family Development.

<sup>11</sup> In spite of the idea of male superiority among Malays, Malay women have been known to be active partners in traditional economy by helping their husbands contribute to household expenses. It was normal to see women working in paddy fields, growing vegetables as well as doing business along side their male counterparts, even outnumbering male businessmen, such as in the state of Kelantan (R. Firth, *Malay Fisherman: Their Peasant Economy*, Morton & Co, New York, p. 17, quoted in Raja Rohana Raja Mamat, *The Role and Status of Malay Women in Malaysia: Social and Legal Perspectives*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1991, pp. 14–15).

<sup>12</sup> The word *fiqh* is an Arabic term meaning 'deep understanding' or 'full comprehension'. Technically it refers to the science of Islamic law extracted from detailed Islamic sources (which are studied in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence), the process of gaining knowledge of Islam through jurisprudence, and the body of legal advice so derived, is known as *fiqh*.

time, reminded to protect the wives and fulfil their rights, as well as to be mindful of the consequences to those who were neglectful of their duties. The application of rights, nevertheless, depended on the moral and religious consciousness of the husbands. There was no legal protection or solutions for women who had problems with errant husbands and there was also no discussion pertaining to women's rights in education, and their public role in society (Raja Rohana, 1991).

Women's contribution in the history of Islamic civilisation was never underlined in Malay traditional society until scholars like Syed Sheikh Al Hadi who returned from Al-Azhar University in Egypt advocated the elevation of the status of women within familial spheres as well as in society. Debates concerning gender justice and equality took on a different level with the emergence of new thoughts on justice and equality for women – a gender discourse which is feminist in its aim, yet is Islamic in language and sources of legitimacy (Sa'addiya, 2003). Scholars like Al Hadi believe that there is discord between Islamic ideals, based on the 'ontology of human equality', and the fact that in varying social context, Muslim women experience injustice in the name of religion (Zanariah, 2007). In Malaysia, this trend has been championed by Sisters in Islam who have taken an egalitarian approach on the notion of the concept of gender justice, justifying their arguments with the reinterpretation of Quranic verses and rejecting the patriarchal gender notion in Islamic law which discriminates against women. They believe that unequal interpretation of the gender role and functions in the society is contrary to the very essence of Islamic teaching which recognizes equality between the two sexes (Sisters in Islam, *Al Quran for Women*, 2004).

Following on from the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995), which described programmes and projects to enhance women's development, highlighting their importance as an economic resource as well as the constraints that limited their involvement, Malaysian women have continued to gain importance and value in their roles in society. Research conducted by Abdullah, Noor and Wok (2008) indicates that increased efforts to enhance women's roles, positions, and status were also recorded in the succeeding Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth plans. Malaysian women have since benefited from the increased provision of more education and training opportunities to improve their upward mobility in the labour market. In the new millennium, women's employment has increased in numerous areas ranging from senior officials, managers, and other professionals as well as technicians and various types of factory workers. Women's employment has also significantly increased in the services and sales sector from 2000 to 2005. However, there are still more men than women in the labour force participation rate, even though there are more women than men in the population.



Recognizing this, the Malaysian government has attempted to influence women to work by 'requesting employers to implement more family-friendly policies such as providing for childcare facilities and more flexible working hours' (Abdullah, et al, 2008, n. p.). This does not, however, eliminate the divide between the traditional view of the woman as a homemaker and the new view of dual-career families, specifically the business woman/mother. The current rise in dual-career families has left women to cope with the demanding obligations of both family and workplace, a relatively new concept to Malaysian women. Abdullah, Noor, and Wok conclude that despite career demands, Malay women remain fully committed to their families, and that the view on women's traditional domestic role has hardly changed over the years, in spite of increased employment of women in the workforce.

### **Malaysian Film Industry**

The Malaysian film industry, which took root in the 1930s, has mainly focused on Malays and Muslim-Malay culture. Indian filmmakers, who were more business oriented than culturally inclined, were initially involved in the production of Malay films. The influx of directors from India resulted in early Malay film scripts being largely adapted from Indian cinema and mythology. During the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), however, the budding Malay film industry was interrupted and there was no encouragement to produce films. Hollywood films were also banned and cinema halls were forced to screen Japanese propaganda films which promoted what was termed as a 'South-East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere' (White, 1996).

By the 1950s, the Malay studio system mirrored the racial and social divisions that existed in colonial Malaya (Van der Heide, 2002). Runme Shaw and Run Run Shaw, originally from Shanghai and better known as the Shaw Brothers, imported Indian and Western films to be shown in their chain of cinemas before the war. The popularity of Albert Balink's Indonesian film *Terang Boelan* (1937) among Malay audiences in Singapore and Malaya around 1938 inspired Malays to make their own films. This resulted in the formation of Malay Film Productions at Ampas Road, Singapore, in the late 1930s. The only other studio that could compete with the Shaw Brothers in terms of production, distribution and exhibition was Cathay-Keris Productions (1953-1973), the result of a tie-up between Loke Wan Tho and Ho Ah Loke. The studio era lasted from the late 1940s to 1970.

As a consequence, a group led by the Singapore-Malay Journalist Association demanded that Malays direct Malay films because they considered the use of Indian directors as an intrusion of foreign culture and a distortion of the indigenous one. Over the years, their

efforts received growing support from cultural groups and almost took a political form due to its nationalistic nature. On the whole, many consider the 1950s to be the golden age of Malay films. The decade saw the return of the Malay spirit and pride in films focusing upon folklore and legend that attracted large crowds to the cinema, turning culture into a profitable commodity. During this ‘golden era’ as many as 174 films were produced. The film industry, however, was divided along ethnic lines in the various levels of operation. Chinese capital ruled over Indian (and briefly Filipino) directors, cinematographers, editors, scriptwriters, Malay actors, and production and post-production crews from Hong Kong (Van der Heide, 2002, pp. 134-137).

The 1950s also saw the first successful Malay director, P. Ramlee, whose film *Penarik Beca* (1955) was ‘hailed by film reviewers as the best Malay film in 1955’ (Hatta, 1997, p. 88). As illustrated in my discussion on melodrama and Malay cinema in the previous chapter, P. Ramlee was extremely versatile and was not only celebrated as a talented actor and director, but also as a musician and composer whose flair was recognised by awards at the annual Asia Pacific Film Festival in various years. Within the context of melodrama, P. Ramlee’s films raises a number of issues that ‘reflect the social and economic conditions of Malaya’ (Barnard, 2006, p. 169), and focused on the conflict between modernity and tradition. P. Ramlee ‘infused the Malay musical and film industries with an identity and energy that have never been duplicated’ (Lockard, 1998, p. 218). He shifted Malay films away from rigid emulation of Indian models and developed a more uniquely Malayan style and content. P. Ramlee’s films, whether social dramas, romances, historical epics, or comedies, are filled with social comments, criticisms or satire, often laced subtly into the entertaining whole. His work exposes the weaknesses of Malay society – criticising socio-cultural conservatism, attacks feudalism, pokes fun at the aristocracy and their hypocrisies, philosophises about discrimination, reveals victimisation of the working-class, satirises polygamy, and encourages a more amenable attitude to sex. By compelling Malays to recognise and laugh at their shortcomings, P. Ramlee hoped to encourage social improvement. He was aware of the potential effect the artist has on society and ‘viewed films and music as serious forms of entertainment to address social problems’ – especially those of the Malay community (Lockard, 1998, p. 220). Today, P. Ramlee is posthumously celebrated as an icon of Malaysian pop culture and is loved by Malaysians of all ethnicities.

From the mid 1950s until the mid-1960s the studios faced labour problems in the form of union strikes (Van der Heide, 2002). Factors such as overworked and understaffed directors, who were also writing screenplays, Singapore’s separation from Malaysia in 1965,

an international slump in Malaysian commodity prices, competition from television introduced in 1963, and better quality American television programmes resulted in studios closing down and, eventually, to the collapse of the Malay film industry by 1973 (Hatta, 1997). During the 1970s, films from Indonesia and Hong Kong flooded the market as the number of Malay films dwindled. In the 1980s, the introduction of video became yet another obstacle that contributed to the recession suffered by the local film industry. Hatta's research found that between 1977 and the end of 1986, 622 cinemas closed down and about 10,000 people from various divisions of the industry were out of work.

In the 1990s, the Malay film industry finally regained momentum with the box-office success and critical acclaim of Aziz M. Osman's 1990 hit *Fenomena* (Khoo, 2006). This decade welcomed a group of filmmakers hailed by film critics as The Malaysian New Wave, including Aziz M. Osman, Shuhaimi Baba, U-Wei Shaari, Adman Salleh and Mahadi J. Murat. Many of them were sent abroad under the NEP to study and returned to produce films influenced by Western cinema. Malaysian films of the 1980s and 1990s have been very commercial, and have presented mostly urban locales that represent the hegemonic modern society that most Malaysians have come to dwell in. Furthermore, this group of filmmakers brought about a revival to the Malay film industry. These filmmakers attempted to provide a more distinct commercial and artistic representation of Malay cinema that indicates Malaysia's position within the modern era of globalisation. This incorporates both the 'Hollywood style of filmmaking as well as elements influenced by the Islamic resurgence', which has had a significant impact on Malay society (Khoo, 2006, p. 92). Many of their films have competed and received critical praise at national level, while Shuhaimi and U-Wei have participated in international film festivals outside Malaysia.

The 1980s saw a new era of state support with the establishment of the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) to regulate and assist the film industry. The objective of this establishment is to nurture, promote and facilitate the development of the film industry in Malaysia (Hatta, 1997). Notable films of this period include Jins Shamsuddin's *Bukit Kepong* (1982), Rahim Razali's *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1984) and Othman Hafsham's *Mekanik* (1983), although not as successful as slapstick comedies by filmmakers like Aziz Satar and A. R. Badul. This dual gush of drama and commercial comedies continued to pervade the industry throughout the 1990s. Filmmakers like Adman Salleh, Mahadi J. Murat, Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatimah, however, made films with a 'profound understanding of the tensions, frustrations and idiosyncrasies that lie beneath the surface of Malay society' (Hassan Muthalib, 2005). The 1990s also witnessed the first RM6 million blockbuster hit *Sembilu II*

(1995) by Yusof Haslam, who produces films which feature predictable plots of romantic melodrama, action-packed stunts and popular singers as actors. All of his films are commercially successful but are panned by critics. Another consistent and successful director in the 1990s is Aziz M. Osman who has managed to achieve balance between popularity and respect for his films. His films feature more sensitive characterisations and better developed narratives. The 1990s also saw the advent of a new kind of art cinema, one which was capable of attracting international attention and funding (Mahyuddin, 2008). Apart from commercial filmmaking, a small number of artistic filmmakers in Malaysia utilise social realism to reflect the truth of people's daily lives. Alternative films by U-Wei Haji Shaari, for example, defy social norms and attract controversy. Award-winning U-Wei is often described as one of Malaysia's finest directors as well as one who would not shy away from incorporating taboo social issues in his productions for the sake of avoiding controversy.

### **National Cinema**

The definition of a national cinema in Malaysia has always been synonymous with Malay-language films, in keeping with the concept of upholding the sovereignty of the Malay race, language and culture outlined in the National Cultural Policy. Hatta (1997) defines Malay 'national' cinema mainly through examples of historical films even though he claims that cinema has an important role to play in the construction of nationhood and that it 'will have to give a true picture of the various ethnic groups' (1997, p. 49). These films were not patronised by the non-Malays because they were regarded as being 'pro-Malay and pro-Muslim' (1997, p. 209). Hatta also addresses the tension between art and commercial cinema in his suggestion that 'a kind of middle cinema is necessary as a trademark for local national cinema'. He defines 'middle cinema' as 'a marriage of art and commercial cinema; at its best it could certainly be regarded as national cinema' (1997, p. 49) and he refers to the work of Hong Kong and Indian new wave filmmakers as examples. Hatta additionally claims that while directors in Indonesia and Thailand strike a compromise between the aesthetic and the commercial in order to attract large crowds and to make large profits for their producers, 'Malaysia has yet to experience this kind of situation' (1997, p. 223). Khoo (2006) suggests that these statements must be put into context as they apply to the 1980s, prior to the emergence of a new 1990s generation of Malay filmmakers who attempt to break down the binary of art versus commercial cinema, but only for pragmatic reasons of survival in the industry. Khoo also points out that in order to attract viewers and music fans Shuhaimi Baba,

for instance, employs popular singers, while many of the leading roles in these films were given to aesthetically appealing actresses.

Khoo, however, terms Malay cinema as a ‘cinema of denial’ and questions the issue of national cinema, arguing, ‘If what we have is a national cinema, who and what are excluded from representing and representation? Is the national cinema Malay and Malaysian? What are the processes of exclusion and how do they function? Who controls the representations of race and class, gender and sexuality?’ (2006, p. 95). Khoo’s argument is fundamentally based on the many ways in which Malay films are not ‘national’. This is largely due to the fact that these films usually feature an all-Malay cast speaking mostly in the Malay language and catering primarily for a Malay audience. Even though the films are physically set in Malaysia, they revolve around Malay society, issues, and customs and rarely present a multi-ethnic storyline. Because Malays dominate Malaysian cinema on and off screen, it is more popularly known as Malay cinema.

Khoo, nevertheless, refers to Othman Hafsham’s *Mekanik* (1983) as an example that is considered by many as truly a Malaysian film. This film features Chinese Malaysians speaking in a mixture of English and Chinese dialects, and Indian Malaysians speaking Tamil. Rahim Razali’s *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (1986) is also referred to as an example of such assimilation, as indicated in the scene which features Tsu Feh, a Chinese woman who converts to Islam, conversing with her Chinese father in Malay, something rarely practised in the Malaysian Chinese home unless they were Peranakan (Chinese with historically Sino-Malay roots). In contrast, *Mekanik* not only features non-Malay actors but also includes a Hindi musical sequence which, while parodying the format of Indian cinema, also pokes fun at some Malay audiences who are infatuated with Bollywood (Khoo, 2006, p. 103). By and large, if and when non-Malay actors are featured in Malay films, they are mostly caricatures or stereotypes with Indians appearing as comic figures or thugs, Chinese being mercenary shopkeepers or landlords, and Caucasian women behaving promiscuously.

The emergence of new independent films in the new millennium, focusing on the ‘other’ instead of Malays, has raised questions on what constitutes the idea of Malaysian cinema. Independent films like Teck Tan’s *Spinning Gasing* (2000) and Amir Muhammad’s *Lips to Lips* (2000) are examples of films that show an awareness of Malaysian ethnic diversity, also because they are in English rather than Malay. Adman Salleh’s historical film *Paloh* (2003) seems also an attempt to rectify this issue of racial representation. The film is set towards the end of the Japanese Occupation and it revolves around an interracial relationship (Chinese-Malay) jeopardized by the national and ethnic politics of the time.

Unlike other historical films, *Paloh* attempts to provide historical and social accuracy by portraying Chinese characters speaking in Mandarin, Hokkien, and broken Malay, and the whole film was subtitled in English. The definition of national cinema in Malaysia has therefore become complicated as this new cinema of cultural diversity does not correspond with the narrow perception of national Malay cinema. In the new millennium, it is clear that a true reflection of the diverse Malaysian culture can only be described when films focusing on other ethnic races are represented and factored into the definition of national cinema.

### **Censorship policies**

The issue of state and self-censorship is another definitive characteristic of the Malaysian film industry. The film censorship process in Malaysia involves the scrutiny of scenes that are regarded by the censorship board as sensitive or controversial. Government control over the film industry further extends to censorship, which has operated under the guidelines initially developed by the British, and based on the ‘colonial service model’ which presumes and enforces the role of cinema (and the media in general) as a tool of the government. Films were, initially, brought into colonial Malaya as a form of entertainment for English officers and colonial administrators (Wan Amizah et al, 2009). Many Western films, particularly those from Hollywood, contained scenes of an unacceptable nature by the standards of most Asian societies and cultures. Such films were censored based on the grounds of religious, cultural and moral values.

In Malaysia, controversy also occurs when a film encounters problems with the Film Censorship Board. Film censorship can be traced as far back as 1960, for example, when KM Basker’s *Noor Islam* (1960) was censored as it contained elements that were derogatory to the Hindu religion (Hamzah Hussin, 2004). Another noted case of a banned film, even upon appeal, is Aziz M Osman’s *Fantasi* (1991) for its mystical elements which contradicted Islamic principles. Although censorship plays a major role in shaping Malay cinema, the Film Censorship Board makes random selections in its choice of targets and even when enforcing its goals. Despite the implementation of the policy in 1995 banning violence, horror, sex and counterculture content in all media, films that contain some of these elements still get past the censors and are either shown in the cinema or sold as VCDs (video compact discs).

### **Independent (Indie) Films**

The Malaysian film industry is a popular ‘Malay’ national cinema which concentrates on the making of one-language films in a multi-ethnic society. This is because, apart from the

language, most of the subjects and themes of the films are concerned with the life and social conditions of the Malays, the biggest ethnic group in Malaysia, while other ethnic groups are considerably under-represented. The industry saw the beginning of the Independent film era with the creation of Malay film companies by Malay film veterans in 1974. According to Ahmad Idris (1987), the first Malay director to be sent to film school abroad was Jins Shamsudin. Consequently, the government, through scholarships and grants and sponsorship, also directly or indirectly supported Malay filmmakers who received training in filmmaking overseas. It was also in the same year that a commission of inquiry on the local film industry was formed and produced a report identifying the problems faced by the industry and proposing the formation of FINAS. The decline of the studio system in the mid 1970s brought about a new independent film culture financed by wealthy individuals with no links to particular film studios. These individuals were normally businessmen who became film producers<sup>13</sup>. The government then also showed their interest in the film business by financing some productions through establishments like Filem Negara Malaysia and FINAS.

Mahyuddin Ahmad (2008), in his essay on the 'indies' as new Malaysian cinema, states that independent film productions of the 1980s and 1990s were a positive development in terms of generic order and aesthetic style. At the forefront of such independent productions were filmmakers like Rahim Razali, Othman Hafsham, Mahadi J. Murad, and U-Wei Hj Shaari who tried to manoeuvre the direction of the industry away from the earlier melodramatic style of the studio system. These filmmakers implemented a more realist approach towards the filmic themes while attempting to sustain the commercial value of their films. According to Mahyuddin, independent productions in the earlier stage of this period did not completely discard and extricate itself from traditions of old Malay cinema, particularly in the context of genre. Melodrama was still a principal genre although not in its original form in which the plot revolves around the conflict between good and evil, but the bourgeois moral system is clearly continued and is re-emphasised at the end of the narrative. The majority of films produced in the 1980s and 1990s are broadly recognisable and are mainly off-shoots of melodrama and comedy but a realist trend became more apparent. The discourse of the National Economic Policy and National Cultural Policy which advocate Malay subjectivity received greater focus in most films of this era (Zawawi, 2006). Films such as Rahim Razali's *Abang* (1981) and *Pemburu* (1982) exemplify the motivation gained from these policies. The exclusion of a multicultural perspective in the films of these times

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Deddy M. Borhan founded Sabah Film; Dato' Syed Kechik owned Syed Kechik Productions.

indicates that the early independent film industry is still largely a popular Malay national cinema. Several other immensely popular comedy films such as *Adik Manja* (1979) and *Mekanik* (1983)<sup>14</sup>, both by Othman Hafsham, also did not provide a sufficient amount of cinematic treatment in order for a justifiably balanced representation of the multicultural aspect of Malaysian society (Mahyuddin, 2008).

There was also unprecedented significant increase in the input from female producers and directors in this period<sup>15</sup>. The more renowned filmmakers like Shuhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima, intrepidly feminist in their approach, are noted for their portrayals of ‘strong-minded, articulate, educated, and independent heroines’ (Khoo, 2005, p. 218) in their films. In *Selubung* (1992), Shuhaimi portrays young, Western-educated individuals and their (mis)understanding of Islam. In *Ringgit Kasorrga* (1995), she attacks corrupt politicians and the exploitation of women, and in *Layar Lara* (1997), she illustrates her support for contemporary young Malaysian filmmakers. Erma Fatima, however, explores the Malay identity in *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (1999) and in *Embun* (2002) the female protagonist represents ‘women [who] must stand up and take their place in the world despite the odds’ (Hassan Muthalib, 2005).

Despite the increase in productions by women filmmakers in the 1990s, the issue of gender and sexual politics was not significantly discussed. Mahyuddin (2008) argues that the construction of the ‘other’, which includes women, in early independent Malaysian films can be linked to the notion of ‘fixity’ as suggested by Homi Bhaba<sup>16</sup>. In terms of the body politics of racial and sexual difference within the context of filmic representation, Mahyuddin argues that ‘the “other” has become “doubly other-ed” – the ethnic other remains at the periphery and the woman becomes the source of enjoyment, a source of iconic pleasure in which both the dominant ethnic and the dominant male enjoy and consume’ (Mahyuddin, 2008, no page number).

The new millennium, however, has presented the beginnings of a more diverse and positive stance to the Malaysian film industry with the development of digital technology and the emergence of new filmmakers who are contributing to the creation of a more culturally

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<sup>14</sup> Albeit *Mekanik* attempts to introduce the concept of an inclusive Malaysia through the portrayal of more tangible non-Malay characters, and enhanced by the line said by a Eurasian female character: ‘Hitam ke, putih ke, kita semua orang Malaysia’ (my translation: ‘Regardless of whether we are black or white, we are all still Malaysians’).

<sup>15</sup> Active female producers at the time were Julie Dahlan and Hajjah Ruhanie Abdul Rahman and noted female directors were Rosnani Jamil, Shuhaimi Baba, Erma Fatima.

<sup>16</sup> According to Bhaba, ‘the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation; it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition’ (1994, p. 67).



effervescent film industry<sup>17</sup>. This new wave of independent filmmakers such as Amir Muhamad<sup>18</sup>, Deepak Kumaran, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, and Ho Yu Hang, bring to the forefront the production of short films and feature films that are socially, culturally and politically distinctive when compared with mainstream productions. With the breakthrough of Amir Muhammad's digital feature, *Lips to Lips* (2000), other young indie filmmakers have also produced digital features or feature-length documentaries<sup>19</sup>. Among them are Osman Ali's *Bukak Api* (2000); James Lee's *Ah Beng Returns* (2001), *Room to Let* (2004) and *Beautiful Washing Machine* (2002); Ho Yuhang's *Min* (2003) and *Sanctuary* (2004); Nam Ron's *Gedebe* (2003); and Deepak Kumaran Menon's *Chemman Chaalai* (2005) to name a few. The subject matter in these films is wide-ranging, more localised and entrenched within the context of a multicultural Malaysia, exploring and questioning discourses that were relatively non-existent in earlier Malaysian films. Teck Tan's *Spinning Gasing* (2000), for example, includes the issue of homosexuality and racial relations in its narrative, and uses English as the main language in the film. This new wave of independent productions are also no longer confined to the generic order; aesthetic and narrative style of previous independent filmmakers, and bravely present issues pertaining to sexuality, racial and gender relations and politics. This is illustrated, for example, in the poignant films of the late Yasmin Ahmad such as *Sepet* (2004); *Gubra* (2005); *Mukhsin* (2006); *Muallaf* (2009), and in Bernard Chauly's romantic comedies *Gol and Gincu* (2005) and *Pisau Cukur* (2009).

These indie filmmakers, nevertheless, face a number of government restrictions. The National Film Policy (2005) which functions as a supposed guideline to create the Malaysian national cinema in effect mirrors the 1952 Film Censorship Act, as illustrated in the banning of Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist* (2006) and *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (2007) which explores aspects of Malaysian history not recorded in prescribed schoolbooks. In addition to bans and censorship, other restrictions include the condition that only films using Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) can be regarded as a Malaysian film – a rule that contradicts the

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<sup>17</sup> One of the digital avenues that encourages and caters to new independent films about women is HerStory Malaysia, a site created in 2010 to provide spaces for women to meet and learn how to share their stories with others using artistic platforms like filmmaking. The ongoing HerStory Films Project seeks to collect stories about love, sex, and desire from Malaysian women, with an emphasis on diversity and personal experiences of falling in—and out—of love in a distinctly Malaysian context. Five of the submitted stories were made into films with the help of established Malaysian women artists in the country and the films were screened as part of a travelling film festival locally.

<sup>18</sup> Amir's *The Big Durian* has been the first Malaysian entry to the Sundance Film Festival (2004).

<sup>19</sup> Digital screenings by Golden Screen Cinemas has provided an avenue for these digital filmmakers to showcase their productions, thus bringing their works closer to the mainstream. Many of their films have participated and achieved recognition at prestigious festivals all over the world.

multicultural aspect of Malaysian society. For example, films like *Chemman Chaalai* (2005) and *The Dancing Bells* (2007) by Deepak Kumaran which are predominantly in Tamil and Ho Yu Hang's *Rain Dogs* (2006), which is in Cantonese, represented Malaysia at international film festivals but are not officially recognised as a Malaysian 'national' film. In spite of this, such indie films have gained considerable momentum and are increasingly defining the notion of a new Malaysian cinema both independently and through the mainstream.

As stated, the points highlighted in the first half of this chapter puts into context the Malaysian backdrop, as well as the position of Malay women in the films that have been selected for this thesis. The details above also provide an insight into the nature of the Malaysian film industry in order to put into perspective the selection of films that are analysed in later chapters.

## Chapter 2

### OBSERVATIONS ON MELODRAMA: WESTERN NOTIONS AND MALAY CONVENTIONS

In this review of related literature, I highlight a range of critical responses relating to feminist film criticism and melodrama that inform my conceptual framework. Discussion begins with Western notions on melodrama's investment in the woman, followed by an account of the melodramatic devices that are incorporated in my conceptual framework. I then provide an outline of the melodramatic tradition in Malay cinema focusing on the influences of *bangsawan*, Indian cinema and highlighting the conventional elements of melodrama in Malay films that also informs my research methodology.

Any discussion on the Western concept of melodrama as a cinematic mode of expression has to begin by acknowledging its antecedents – the novel and certain types of stage melodrama – from which directors and screenplay writers have borrowed their models. A standard figure in 19<sup>th</sup> century stage melodrama was the suffering and virtuous heroine (Neale 2000). Familial values were also a main component of these melodramas, in particular, the sub-genre of 'domestic melodrama' (Booth, 1991, p. 153). The terms 'drama' as well as 'melodrama' were used to describe the plays themselves. *Drame* (as defined and described by Diderot [1758]) was also commonly cited as either a forerunner or an early form of melodrama (Brooks, 1976, p. 13). The advent of melodrama as a theatrical genre occurred in late 19<sup>th</sup> century France and Germany and this form of melodrama later spread to other European countries, Britain and America. Melodrama was, in this initial phase, defined as a specific passage, scene or play in which spoken dialogue or mute action was accompanied and highlighted by music (Neale, 2000, pp. 184-185).

Indications of a certain type of film that particularly appealed to women began to appear in film journals of the early 1920s. Films like *Christine of the Hungry Heart* (Archainbaud, 1924) feature a female character faced with emotional, social and psychological problems. Even with their focus on female characters, these films were seldom called 'woman's film'. Like *Christine of the Hungry Heart*, many of these films were adapted from best-selling novels, stories and plays by both women and men writers. Such films were not described as melodrama, but as 'drama', heart-tugging tearjerkers that especially appeal to

women. ‘Drama’ along with ‘romance’, ‘love story’ and ‘mother love story’, ‘comedy drama’ and ‘soap opera’, were amongst the most common terms used to describe women’s films (Neale, 2000, p. 181). The term ‘melodrama’ itself has also referred to films that featured crime and violence, action and suspense, damsels in distress, and villains that avoid justice until the very end. These definitions were often encouraged by the reviews and publicity that surrounded the films and suggests that melodrama is unlike sub-genres that stress a display of heightened emotions and sentimentality, such as soap operas, the woman’s film and family melodrama (Singer, 1990, p. 95). The debate on melodrama that commenced in the early 1970s, nevertheless, consisted of some of the most complex ideas in film studies and engaged with almost all of the key theoretical ideas within the discipline, such as auterism, representation, aesthetics, and the ideological function of cinema. What also influenced the framework and the essence of the film studies’ description of melodrama was the gender-specific appeal to women.

From the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s, melodrama had been considered in mostly a pejorative manner, as it corresponded with immoral or futile tragedy from a period in 19<sup>th</sup> century dramatic history. Melodrama was, in this manner, regarded as the anti-value in a field where tragedy and realism were the basis of ‘high’ cultural value as opposed to ‘melodramatic’ entertainment (Mercer and Shingler, 2004, p. 81). And it was partly cinema’s association with melodrama that prevented it from being a significant object of study. Film studies of the 1960s, however, were dominated by auterism, which emphasised the lavishness of Hollywood *mise en scène*. A reassessment of the films of Douglas Sirk was a landmark for melodrama and with it the woman’s film. The utilisation of melodrama by Sirk to unveil the falsehoods and inconsistencies of bourgeois ideology was significant even to the point of Sirk being regarded by many as ‘author’ to melodrama itself (Willemsen 1977; Halliday and Sirk 1972). A Brechtian interpretation of Sirk’s style places bourgeois wish-fulfilment as the object of parody, corresponding with high production values of 1950s melodrama which focused on upper-middle-class homes packed with rich furnishings and consumer goods, enjoying the life-style of a class ‘basking complacently under Eisenhower, while already disintegrating from within’ (Halliday, 1972, p. 10). The connection of melodrama with bourgeois fantasy, however, was made problematic by a commonsense association with women. This is obvious in descriptions of Sirk’s handling of what would otherwise be regarded as Hollywood’s lowliest form – the woman’s weepie. By labelling the family as a bourgeois institution, the evidence of bourgeois ideology is considered as a subject

traditionally assigned to women – the home, family matters, consumption, sentiment, fantasy and romance. All suggest a similarity between the ‘feminine’ and bourgeois ideology.

The discovery of Sirk and his ideology-focused, bourgeois family melodramas affected the area of authorial *mise en scène*, and resulted in a genre. Directors like Minelli, Cukor, Ophuls and Kazan, whose stylistic excess became a generic trademark were also noted, and like Sirk, created the parameters of a new critical field (Halliday 1972). The establishment of the family melodrama as a genre that seemed incongruous to the classic realist/narrative text, however, not only obscured melodrama’s connection with the woman’s film, but also complicates its link with 19<sup>th</sup> century melodramatic forms that make up the founding tradition of Hollywood in general. The problem that followed created interesting debates in terms of what melodrama offers in relation to ideology, mode, style, and genre.

### **Western Perspectives on Melodrama**

Peter Brooks’ *The Melodramatic Imagination* is regarded as a foundational text that offers a classic model of melodrama based on French theatre from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It also links melodrama to the Freudian account of the psyche and creates a channel that allows film to be reconnected to its 19<sup>th</sup> century forerunner. This text has been instrumental in the perception of melodrama as a mode, as used by Christine Gledhill for example. In contrast to the more pejorative and restricted idea of melodrama, Brooks perceives melodrama as a modern mode that uses the expression of realism together with an aesthetic of ‘muteness’<sup>20</sup> (1976, p.72) to explain everyday modern and secular life. Melodrama is identified as a dramatic and literary form that grew in post-sacred cultures where society needed to find a secular system of ethics and of making everyday life meaningful in the absence of religion. Brooks’ concept of the moral occult also lies at the centre of his foundational treatment of melodrama, defined as ‘the hidden yet operative domain of values that the drama ... attempts to make present within the ordinary’ (1976, p.5). For Brooks, the moral occult is the pivotal aspect of melodrama: ‘The melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult’ (1976, p.5).

While Brooks perceives the necessity for melodrama to use realism as part of its aesthetic, he also describes melodrama as being equally influenced by muteness. Speech is substituted by music and dialogue, by gesture and *mise en scène* in order to give melodrama

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<sup>20</sup> The aesthetic of muteness refers to a rich rhetoric of the non-verbal. For example, at the end of a scene there is a temporary resolution of meaning through a visual summary of the emotional situation in a tableau where the actions and gestures of a character is compositionally organised and frozen, like an illustrative painting.

its unique form. Melodrama's choice of gestural, visual, and musical excess represents the expressive method of or the 'text of muteness'. Devices such as pantomime, tableaux and spectacle, for instance, reach towards 'meanings which cannot be generated from the language code' (1976, p. 72). Melodrama's inheritance from popular tradition enables it to penetrate 'everything that constitutes the "reality principle", all its censorships, accommodations, tonings-down' (1976, p. 41) of post-Enlightenment discourse. The melodramatic plot normally presents an initial mis-recognition of the innocence of the main protagonist. Characteristically, the innocent cannot make use of the powers of the villain and must (naturally) become victims, a position justified by various devices that rationalise their obvious inaction. The storyline then moves towards a clear moral identification of all protagonists and is finally resolved by public acknowledgment of where guilt and innocence rests.

The family is also the heart of bourgeois social arrangements and provides a range of identities and the space for melodramatic action. In relation to this, Brooks goes into Freudian realms and comments that characters in melodrama 'assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child and express basic psychic conditions' (1976, p. 4). The 'over-determined' psychic institution of the family engages into unconscious desires and forces but this does not suggest that melodrama is about either family or individual psychology 'because melodrama exteriorises conflict and psychic structures producing ...what we might call the "melodrama of psychology"' (Brooks, 1976, pp. 35-36). The family is, for melodrama, a means and not an end. Brooks concludes that melodrama acts powerfully in society revealing the socialisation of the deeply personal. This can be likened to experiencing a nightmare which ends with the confrontation and expulsion of the villain and a reaffirmation of 'decent people' in society. Brooks' concern is

not melodrama as a theme or a set of themes, nor the life of the drama *per se*, but rather melodrama as a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force (1976, p. xiii).

Idealised images of family members are, however, tested in melodrama. The family melodrama contains a far more emotional and psychological tone, and when the family is presented as less stable, 'characters interact as the structure of inequality generates tension, conflict, and change' (Byars, 1991, p. 99).

In the 1970s, larger movements within film theory became more influential in the critical establishment of melodrama. Thomas Elsaesser's seminal essay, 'Tales of Sound and Fury' (1972), for instance, was among the earliest and it appears to remain as one of the most comprehensive accounts of melodrama, cited in all related scholarly work since its publication. The essay addresses the melodramatic aspect of Hollywood aesthetics, and cinema's position in the area of European melodramatic forms. The essay appears to be balanced between the auterist and *mise en scène* approaches of the 1960s and the ideological concerns of the 1970s. Emphasis in the essay is formal and considers melodrama as 'a problem in style and articulation' (Mercer and Shingler, 2004, p. 47). Elsaesser additionally suggests in his essay on Minnelli that to follow-up on this argument would mean reconsidering the 'great tradition' (1987, p. 217) of humanist realism that the *mise en scène* discussion of the 1960s inherited from literary criticism. This would specifically entail reconsidering the relationship between melodrama and both realism and the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. In her review of early film scholarship on melodrama, Gledhill suggests that a crucial feature of this essay is that it acknowledges the importance of pathos as a melodramatic device. In general, Elsaesser's arguments are constructive partly because he includes a historical review of melodrama's theatrical and literary predecessors and partly because he recognises melodrama as the basis of Hollywood's aesthetic, emotional and cognitive effects. To most film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s Elsaesser's essay seems to present the possibility of considering melodrama as a valid genre.

In 'Minnelli and Melodrama' (1987), Geoffrey Nowell-Smith draws upon the Freudian notion of conversion hysteria to highlight the historical connection between realism and melodrama. Nowell-Smith's generic analysis reiterates melodrama's problematic relation to the classic realist/narrative text. If the family melodrama's domain lies in generational and gender conflict, verisimilitude dictates that the key issues of sexual difference and identity be realistically portrayed. These issues, however, are specifically what realism is intended to suppress. Drawing in material that can only be represented in the excessive *mise en scène* makes a work melodramatic. The radical potential of melodrama, therefore, seems to point to the possibility that realistic conditions of psychic and sexual identity – functioning as what he terms as a 'hysterical text' – may disrupt the unity of classic realist narrative (Nowell-Smith, 1987, p. 73). Melodrama, then, seems less of a Sirkian critique of bourgeois lifestyle and values. Ideological failure in the melodramatic plan marks the failure of realism. Nowell-Smith's method of analysis resulted in more debate on the construction of genre itself on the basis of the 1950s family melodrama and his argument produced more complexities in terms

of melodrama's connection with various melodramatic phases of earlier and later decades (Mercer and Shingler, 2004, p. 9). The connection between family melodrama and the woman's film was also made ambiguous and this became one of the significant questions for feminist reflection on melodrama.

By the 1980s, a general basic model of the Hollywood family melodrama was established in film theory, as illustrated by the inclusion of a chapter on the family melodrama in Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* (1981) alongside chapters on other genres like the western, the gangster film, the detective film, the screwball comedy and the musical. Schatz's strict definition of melodrama refers to narrative forms combining music with drama (1981, p. 148). This definition is generally applied to popular romances portraying a virtuous woman victimised by repressive and unfair social circumstances, particularly those involving marriage, occupation, and the nuclear family. Characters are usually at the mercy of social conventions and the narrative traces the ultimate acceptance of the principals to the structures of social and familial traditions (Schatz, 1981, p. 149). The 1950s Hollywood canon focuses on the family in which the narratives address the alienation of the individual because of the inability of the familial and societal institutions to fulfil his or her particular needs. The family unit functions as the ideal setting for the main character because it is a pre-established group in which individual roles such as mother, father, child and adult carry with them large social significance. The family unit is also bound to its community by social class, as determined normally by the father's job and income, type and location of the family home, and other such factors. Ideally, the family represents a 'natural' as well as a social collective and a self-contained society in and of itself. At the end, however, this ideal is denigrated by the family's status within a highly structured socio-economic milieu. Its identity as an autonomous human community is, therefore, denied and instead, the larger social community determines family roles (Schatz, 1981, p. 153).

At the end of the twentieth century, Linda Williams poses the idea that instead of being a genre or any other sub-set of American filmmaking, melodrama is the all-encompassing American mode of filmmaking comprising many genres and is ubiquitous in nature. Williams offers a 'revised theory of a melodramatic mode – rather than the more familiar notion of the melodramatic genre' (1998, p. 43). Largely influenced by Brooks and Gledhill, Williams suggests that melodrama is ultimately concerned with highlighting moral values and determining moral right. This normally requires a main protagonist whose moral virtue goes unnoticed by other characters until the climax of the narrative.



If emotional and moral registers are so sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of the beset victim; if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and actions, the operative mode is melodrama (1998, p. 42).

Melodrama can therefore be considered as a type of sensational, exciting, and, more importantly, moving story that reveals ‘the combined function of realism, sentiment, spectacle and action in effecting the recognition of a hidden or misunderstood virtue’ and that the feeling of righteousness ‘achieved through the suffering of the innocent’ is emphasised (Williams, 1998, p. 48). Melodrama has been the main form of popular cinema rather than a buried and embedded element within realist narrative, and neither realism nor the strength of action should, therefore, suggest that action films are not melodramas. Williams’ argument that melodrama has discarded its traditional values, ideologies, and acting styles whilst continuing to deliver the melodramatic experience aptly connects to Gledhill’s suggestion that melodrama is not nor ever was a singular genre. Due to its extensive socio-cultural hold, the melodramatic mode not only generates a broad diversity of genres but also draws other modes into its processes of articulation. Melodrama, consequently, ‘thrives on comic counterpoint, can site its fateful encounters in romance, and keeps pace with the most recent modes, realism, which first worked in cooperation with melodrama and then disowned it’ (Gledhill, 2000, p. 229). Elements such as action and sentiment, pathos and spectacle, supposedly appealing to differently gendered audiences are, therefore, drawn into a ‘composite aesthetic dramatic modality’ (Gledhill, 2000, p. 230) that may create different generic offshoots of melodrama such as the woman’s film for instance.

In the context of the woman’s film, a great deal of sophisticated work has been conducted on the various stages of Hollywood films in the 1930s, the 1940s and the 1950s - some well-known films are *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1937), *Now, Voyager* (Rapper, 1942), and *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945). Neale’s (2000) examination of the Hollywood 1950s canon (films by Sirk, Ray, Ophuls and Minnelli) reveals that there are discrepancies between Hollywood and Film Studies’ accounts of melodrama. The term ‘melodrama’ itself, according to Neal, is used in reference to some of these films but not to describe their emotional or psychological aspects; rather to indicate their sensational themes. Neal argues that from an industry perspective the women’s films that were melodramas were the serial queen films – adventures built around a heroine, from the early 1910s to early 1920s. The woman’s film was

not a lowly genre but is instead ‘lofty’, and associated with ‘taste’ and ‘quality’, and aimed at middle-class women. Neal’s view is comparable with many feminist film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s like Molly Haskell, Mary Ann Doane, and Gledhill, for instance.

The obviously overlapping categories of the female melodrama and the woman’s film have been subdivided by various feminists into different types. Doane (1987), for example, defines four: the female patient, the maternal, the impossible love, and the paranoid melodrama. E. Ann Kaplan (1992), focusing primarily on maternal melodrama, suggests three typologies: the sacrifice paradigm, the phallic mother paradigm, and the resisting paradigm. Tania Modleski (1992), however, comments on hysteria, desire, and muteness, as behavioural comportments of women in melodrama. Masochism, nevertheless, is everywhere, except in the resisting paradigm – and even there it comes close. Such processes of categorisation involved ‘the assimilation of the woman’s film to an already established genre [melodrama] capable of lending to the woman’s film some of its long-standing genericity’ (Altman, 1998, p. 31). Categories of melodrama and the woman’s film, however, became synonymous in the 1980s, and this represents an important and necessary stage in the constitution of the woman’s film as a genre.

The woman’s film conventionally positions at the core of the narrative a female protagonist ‘who is trying to deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman’ (Basinger, 1993, p. 20). It extends generically beyond the confines of melodrama (as defined and understood within Film Studies). Although there are differences between films that are categorised as a screwball comedy, a murder story, a western, a musical, a biographical account, and even film noir, each can be defined as a woman’s film. The fixed conventions that are apparent in women’s films do not exist in quite the same way as other genres, as the setting could be in any time or place, with either a real or imaginary locale, contemporary or historical. ‘It may be purely a generic type of woman’s film ... (a melodrama with a big-name female movie star), but it may also be a female version of some other, presumably more ‘masculine’ genre, such as a western or a gangster movie’ (Basinger, 1993, p. 9).

Films termed as ‘weepies’ or ‘tearjerkers’ that feature a central female character and a privileged female perspective portray the world of emotions and not action. The appeal of the woman’s film for the spectator (primarily female, but also male) is the *mise en scène* of female desire. It thematises female desire and therefore produces female subjectivity and projects woman’s *jouissance* (unspeakable pleasure) onto the screen. From the psychoanalytic perspective, however, the female protagonist is, in the end, destroyed by her unspeakable

pleasure. She eventually becomes reinscribed onto her 'lawful' places as (m)other. In this way, the woman's film functions ideologically as repression of female desire and reassertion of the woman's role as reproducer and nurturer. If the female protagonist is incapable of resuming or assuming that role, then she must step aside, or disappear. Tears are produced because of the ultimate non-fulfilment of desire; the spectator only sees the dream, and this fantasy, therefore, stands for the real (Fischer, 1989, p.101).

While scholars like Gledhill have regarded the notion of the 'woman's film' as representing a sub-set of melodrama, others have considered feminism as partly responsible for the critical takeover of the form and concept of the 'woman's film'. It is therefore essential to review several key ideas in feminist film theory that positions melodrama in women's cultural domain.

### **Melodrama and Feminist Film Criticism**

The revival of the woman's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s meant that American feminist critics gave serious thought to both the positive and negative potential of film. In the study of plots and characters of popular films, for example, attention was given to the stereotypes and social roles of women, 'two of the most conservative of the representational practices that operate to express and support dominant ideologies' (Byars, 1991, p. 29). Through melodrama, feminists discovered a genre distinguished by the large space offered to female protagonists, the domestic sphere, and by attention to socially endorsed 'feminine' concerns. Melodrama's exposure of masculinity's contradictions could therefore be seen as a threat to unity of the (patriarchal) realist/narrative text.

When film studies took on melodrama and Hollywood films for women as key subjects for research and debate from the late 1970s onwards, film scholars such as Chuck Kleinhans, Elsaesser and Nowell-Smith continually explained the extent to which patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted within these movies. In the course of film melodrama's development, it is apparent that the conflict featured is with patriarchy (Kaplan, 1983, p. 45). The term 'patriarchy' seems to be appropriate as it contains in its etymology the recognition of the 'man's world', as patriarchy is founded on the repression of women. Patriarchal ideology represents and constructs the control of women by men, 'and awareness in America of this fact was given new impetus by the widespread influence ... of the discoveries of Freud' (Lang, 1989, pp. 3-4). In psychoanalytic terms, patriarchal ideology believes that

the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only

one. A single practice and representation of the sexual. With its history, its requirements, reversals, lack, negative(s)...of which the female sex is the mainstay. This model, a phallic one, shares the values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form, unity, visibility...and erection (Irigaray 1985, cited by Lang, 1989, p. 4).

Melodrama, therefore, clearly represents a struggle against or within patriarchy and what seeks release and definition is a repressed identity. Kleinhans and Laura Mulvey, subsequently, began a line of enquiry into melodrama that would largely determine the agenda in the following years, further developed and refined in the work of scholars like Gledhill, Doane, and Modleski.

In the realm of feminist film criticism, the family is often perceived as a political institution and as a place of oppression for women. The nature of the family enables it to operate in society as an institution that recreates individuals as both class and sexed subjects. Kleinhans adopts a Marxist- feminist sociological approach, and explains the social relations of capitalist production in terms of a split between 'productive' work and personal life confined to the home, the 'sphere of reproduction' (1991, p. 197). Women are, in this way, marginalised outside production because one of the most basic contradictions of capitalist society is the notion that people's problems with the public sphere of work can be solved in their private life. In the family scenario, women are, as custodian of the home, expected to provide the rewards and satisfaction that have otherwise proved unobtainable in **public** life. More significantly, family melodramas employ the same process of displacement by making the family and the domestic environment the place for expressing social pressures, frustrations and dissatisfaction. The weight of resolving social problems is portrayed as being placed largely with the female characters. In most cases, the female characters in family melodramas attempt to resolve familial conflict through the suppression of their own desires and other acts of self-sacrifice (Kleinhans, 1991, p. 201).

As melodrama is the genre of domesticity, early critical neglect of its content has often been attributed to male critics' lack of interest in 'women's pictures'. The genres that first received powerful critical attention, particularly the western and the gangster film, enabled an understanding of Hollywood cinema 'as a version of myth, as a popularisation and an ideologisation of American history, belonging to the male sphere, exterior and public' (Mulvey, 1994, p.122). When it was suggested as a genre in the 1950s, the domestic

melodrama, however, did not receive strong appeal. The ‘interior’ world of the melodrama thus did not immediately receive a different kind of critical understanding appropriate for the private sphere and its nuances of femininity. In order to escape from its ‘feminised ghetto’, certain conceptual and ideological shifts in cultural methodologies had to occur. The realm of the feminine had to find a voice that could provide critical commentary on its genre of domestic melodrama. Simultaneously, the interior aspect of the domestic had to reveal a new area – ‘the “unspeakable”’ (Mulvey, 1994, p. 122). The voice and the language provided by feminism make it possible to alter the content aspect of melodrama into significant substance, while psychoanalytic theory (from Elsaesser’s ‘Tales of Sound and Fury’ onwards) would provide the concepts that could convert the ‘unspeakable’ into the unconscious (dreams and desire).

In contrast with male film scholars’ interest in questions of *mise en scène*, genre and ideology, the focus of feminist scholars lies with Hollywood’s attempt to cater to female audiences. This resulted in a change from recognising melodrama’s potential progressive or revolutionary nature to disclosing the more conservative and repressive aspects of the genre. Mulvey’s groundbreaking feminist critique of Hollywood cinema plays a key role in the development of feminist cine-psychoanalysis. She poses the notion of melodrama as a ‘safety valve’ (1987, p. 75) for showing the contradictions of family and sexual relations under patriarchy in her evaluation of Hollywood films for women and in particular its female-centred melodramas. In other words, melodrama is regarded as a means for the patriarchal order to continue via a temporary and fictionalised acknowledgement of its repressive effects upon women. Mulvey’s work is also important for initiating what was to become a new way of examining Hollywood’s films for women. She makes a distinction between two types of melodrama: one dominated by a female protagonist’s viewpoint, and another that deals with Oedipal problems of the male hero (as fellow victim of patriarchal society). The latter refers to the genre as established and described by Elsaesser and Nowell-Smith. The former is prompted by Sirk’s films that focus on female characters but, potentially, refers to a larger and established category of films made for the female audience: ‘women’s weepies’, romantic and costume dramas (1987, pp. 76-77). This much more diverse category of cinema became the basis of Doane’s research in the 1980s. It also provided the basis for many future discussions of melodrama and the woman’s film, including Gledhill’s work in the same decade.

Mulvey also questions the construction of melodrama in terms of the intersection of gender and genre as a form that exposes hidden contradictions. This is because of what she notes as the intense recognition felt by many women over the emotional and ideological

dilemmas portrayed in Sirk's woman's films. Patriarchal culture has consistently turned domestic conflict into a safety valve for social problems arising from the overestimation of masculinity (Mulvey, 1987, p. 77). The family melodramas of the 1950s which are remakes of women's films of the 1930s could be equally regarded as attempts to reconstruct heterosexual relations and gender roles in a post-war reconnection with the 'feminine' (Mulvey, 1975, p. 7). If contradictions arising from the sexual and social positioning of men and women in relation to each other are hidden in the accommodations Western culture makes to the symbolic functioning of masculinity – for example in the western or gangster film with their codes of action, honour, success and failure – they are part of the daily experience of the female audience, who have little need to practise subversive reading in order to understand them. From this position, Mulvey proposes the influential distinction between male and female points of view in melodrama. Melodrama is still essentially defined by its method of 'working certain contradictions through to the surface and re-presenting them in an aesthetic form' (Mulvey, 1987, p. 79). This position illustrates the continuing love-hate relationship that feminists have had with melodrama.

The shift in critical thinking about melodrama was made significant by the first published anthology of studies on film melodrama and the 'woman's film', *Home is Where the Heart Is* (1987). In Gledhill's introductory chapter, a new idea on melodrama is described and a new methodology for studying melodrama is proposed. Gledhill's idea of film melodrama is mostly informed by Brooks' study of melodramatic theatre and literature. She highlights the mainly pejorative use of the term 'melodrama' by film scholars until the renewed interest in films by Sirk in the 1950s, films regarded as ironic and subversive critiques of American film ideology (1987, p. 7). Prior to this critics had used melodrama as the 'anti-value for a critical field in which tragedy and realism became cornerstones of "high" cultural value' (Gledhill, 1987, p. 5). For these critics, melodrama not only lacked the seriousness and intellectual credence of either tragedy or realism but was also censured for its lowly appeal.

Gledhill's feminist perspective in reviewing and summing up the melodrama debate within film studies is clear from her comments on Elsaesser's 'Tales of Sound and Fury'. Although acknowledging the importance of pathos, Gledhill criticises Elsaesser for not examining how the female protagonist affects plot structures and for not differentiating the family melodrama from women's film and romantic drama. The films discussed by Elsaesser in his 1972 study of the Hollywood melodrama were not made for exclusively female audiences and could not be regarded as women's films. Their significance for Elsaesser

seemed to be primarily for male audiences. Subsequently, the feminist project within film studies that was largely inspired by Mulvey's intervention appeared to rectify this imbalance. Gledhill embraces the emergence of a feminist project on melodrama, recognising that the main concern of feminist film scholars over melodrama was mainly in disclosing the ironies and volatility of Hollywood's attempts to reproduce the contradictions of femininity under patriarchy. In keeping with key ideas from Lacanian psychoanalysis to explain why subjectivity appears to be a predominantly male area Gledhill poses the question, 'Can women speak, and can images of women speak for women?' (1984, p. 31). Mulvey and much of feminist film criticism provide a negative answer in that,

women then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning (Mulvey, 1975, p. 7).

The description of Mulvey's visual pleasure of narrative cinema is significant here as it outlines two possibilities that reduce the threat of the woman's image on the male viewer. Mulvey's analysis aimed to get to the root of women's oppression in order to break away from those codes that cannot produce female subjectivity. Only the destruction of the major forms of narrative pleasure that view women as objects can ensure the portrayal not of woman as difference but of the differences of women.

Gledhill, however, argues against the tendency for psychoanalytic feminist film criticism to blame realist representation for an ideological involvement with the suppression of semiotic differences. This kind of reasoning basically suggests that the simple rejection of various types of realist representation will radically cause the viewer to be aware of how images are produced. Gledhill suggests that this awareness is insufficient and that the social construction of reality and of women cannot be defined in terms of signifying practice alone. If a radical ideology such as feminism is to create a framework for political action 'one must finally put one's finger on the scales, enter some kind of realist epistemology' (Gledhill, 1984, p. 41). Additionally, any attempt to create heroines as strong and powerful opens the portrayal up to the charge of male identification. Regardless of attempts to emphasise potential feminine identifications, all available positions are already created from the perspective of patriarchy so as to suppress real female difference, and thus 'the unspoken remains unknown and the speakable reproduce what we know, patriarchal reality' (Gledhill, 1984, p. 37).

The solution to this predicament is in 'the location of those spaces in which women, out of their socially constructed differences as women, can and do resist' (Gledhill, 1984, p. 42). These include discourses produced primarily for and usually by women that address the contradictions that women encounter under patriarchy. Such discourses are exemplified in the form of women's advice columns, magazine fiction, soap operas, and melodramatic 'women's films'. These are locations where women speak to one another in languages that are cultivated from their specific social roles as mothers, housekeepers, and miscellaneous care-givers. The social, economic, and emotional discourses for women consumed by mainly female audiences is complemented by the notion that some of these discourses are also differently inscribed to require a female reading.

Examination of the key ideas proposed in feminist film criticism additionally suggests that much recent feminist criticism has divided film narratives into male and female forms. The male forms are linear, action-packed narratives that promote identification with predominantly male characters who are the architects of their environment. And the female forms are less linear narratives that encourage identification with passive, suffering heroines. Annette Kuhn describes a feminist and 'structural' approach to film narratives and proposes that 'woman' as 'a structure or narrative function' should be considered as functioning 'within the textual organisation of certain types of film'. It may be more feasible 'to isolate recurrent or typical narrative functions or interactions of character and narrative action in dominant cinema' and relate them specifically to 'woman' (Kuhn, 1978, p. 31). Analysing the 'woman structure' involves seeing 'woman' not as a 'concrete gendered human being who happens to exist on the cinema screen' but as a 'structure governing the organisation of story and plot in a narrative or group of narratives' (Kuhn, 1978, p. 32). This further involves evaluating representations by way of the conditions of women in society but without the assumption that texts directly reflect society.

A rudimentary yet essential topic in the appreciation of films for women is the affective power of the melodramatic text. Jane Shattuc (1994) examines what she considers to be the refusal of feminist criticism to acknowledge the political power of affect in melodrama (even those with a conservative 'happy ending'). Feminism's tentativeness in endorsing the affective quality of melodrama originates from 'a traditional leftist idea of false consciousness' (Shattuc, 1994, p. 149). This means that tears became the sign of being enthralled not only intellectually but also emotionally (the ultimate sign of control) by the bourgeois morality of the film's content. Instead, a new feminist reading strategy should be formed based on dual awareness of the text as 'both positive and negative hermeneutics'



(Shattuc, 1994, p. 148). The terms of debate should recognise that emotion can be reasoned and tears mean active involvement, not dismissed as trite responses. Tears ultimately do not indicate feminine weakness, as patriarchy might suggest, but are the manifestation of physical pleasure, which could be likened to Barthes's notion of *jouissance*. Having a good cry meant a possibility that 'the disempowered' could negotiate 'the difficult terrain between resistance and involvement' (Shattuc, 1994, p. 154).

## **Devices Generating Melodramatic Pleasures**

### ***Mise en Scène***

Melodrama has always been noted for its use of *mise en scène* to articulate aspects in the film that cannot be expressed in so many words, demonstrating the ability of popular cinema to express things visually rather than verbally. In the 1950s Hollywood melodramas, *mise en scène* is perhaps the most important melodramatic device, as it fills in the gaps where characters are unable or unwilling to express (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 51). A distinct relationship exists between melodrama and *mise en scène* and singles out the expressive relationship of décor to character as typically melodramatic. Both physical and psychical characteristics of melodrama have an impact on the organisation of the *mise en scène*:

The melodrama is iconographically fixed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or the small-town setting, its emotional pattern is that of panic and latent hysteria, reinforced stylistically by a complex handling of space in interiors ... to the point where the world seems totally predetermined and pervaded by 'meaning' and interpretable signs (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 62).

This means that the domestic setting provides a variety of artificial and spatial opportunities for filmmakers to create suggestive *mise en scène*. Furthermore, in contrast to the 'action genres' (e.g. musicals, westerns), *mise en scène* plays a role in the portrayal of characters in domestic melodramas who have no outlet for their emotions. In action genres, conflicts can be successfully 'externalised and projected into direct action' (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 49), but in melodrama the physical and social realm in which the characters live prohibits them from openly expressing their emotions or resolving their concerns through decisive actions.

In terms of the concept of point of view and its relationship to *mise en scène*, there are sometimes inconsistent levels of awareness between audience and character in terms of irony and pathos. Typical melodramatic situations strongly trigger audience participation 'for there is a desire to make up for the emotional deficiency, to impart the different awareness'

(Elsaesser, 1987, p. 66) which in other genres is blocked in order to produce suspense. This appears, for example, in the form of a need to warn the female protagonist of the imminent danger in the shape of the villain's shadow, for instance. In the more sophisticated melodramas, however, this pathos is produced through a 'liberal' *mise en scène* that balances points of view. This allows the audience to be in a position of seeing and assessing contrasting attitudes within a thematic framework – a framework that is inaccessible to the protagonists themselves. The film audience is 'privileged' because of the access it possesses to information that the character does not have.

The *mise en scène* in melodrama can also become overtaxed with meaning (Willemen 1977; Schatz 1981; Elsaesser 1987). Anxieties and contradictions that are not clearly expressed within the narrative are transferred onto objects. This turns the bourgeois home into a stifling environment for its inhabitants (as in Sirk's and Minnelli's films). Nowell-Smith (1987) and Mulvey (1987) further develop this argument and suggest that the ideological contradictions within the family melodrama were so evident that at moments of high tension, narrative coherence breaks down. These contradictions, they claim, become so intense that they actually rupture the cohesiveness of the classical narrative structure. Nowell-Smith argues that, 'the undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated in the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/lineage/inheritance is traditionally expressed in the music and in the case of film in certain elements of the *mise en scène*' (1987, p. 73).

## Music

The language of melodrama is mainly gestural, relating particularly to music (Brooks, 1976, pp.13-14). Music is not only inextricably linked to the origins of melodrama, but is also an essential component in melodrama's attempt to evoke the inexpressible i.e. to express that which seems inaccessible to verbal language. Melodrama is often defined as a dramatic narrative because of the musical accompaniment which indicates the emotional effects. Music, therefore, functions as 'a system of punctuation', providing expressive colour and contrast to the narrative, by organising the emotional ups and downs of the plot 'to formulate certain moods – sorrow, violence, dread, suspense, happiness' (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 50). Melodrama is thus an expressive code and a form of dramatic *mise en scène* that is exemplified by active use of spatial and musical categories differs from literary ones. Similarly, melodrama's emotional content is usually expressed in the music which is one of the 'elements of the *mise en scène*' that 'heighten[s] the emotionality of an element of the

action' (Nowell-Smith, 1987, p. 73). Melodrama, therefore, increases the function of music in providing passive and emotional support to film's visual and dramatic presentation.

Along with other non-referential signs like performance, gesture and rhythm, music is used to express melodrama's linguistic limitations. Although music is not able to function in a mimetic way, it can gesture towards the 'something better' – a utopian impulse (Dyer, 1981, p. 177). Although this utopian function relates to Hollywood musicals, the idea is also appropriate to melodrama, due to the central (and etymological) position of music within this genre. Music, therefore, offers a promise of fantasy and desire, if not its fulfilment, and hence plays a significant role particularly in the love story. Most romantic films associate a distinctive musical theme with the couple's desire and this piece of music is repeated in every scene involving the couple (Doane, 1987). Desire and emotion are not accessible to a visual discourse but require 'the supplementary expenditure' of a musical score. Music 'takes over where the image leaves off – what is in excess in relation to the image is equivalent to what is in excess of the rational' (Doane, 1987, p. 97). Music constantly highlights that there is more desire than meaning. Music is utilised to isolate the moments of greatest significance, indicating to the audience 'where to look despite the fact that the look is inevitably lacking' (Doane, 1987, p. 98).

### **Pathos, Emotion and Excess**

Melodramas are not concerned with action and an active protagonist but with emotion. Protagonists in melodrama are noted for their failure to take action to resolve their problems – making them effectively oppressed and repressed individuals. As a result of this passivity, the film presents a build-up of emotions and tension that cannot be turned into action and then resolved in a satisfactory manner. Because of this repressed emotions erupt in moments of high tension or drama and manifest themselves as symptoms through performance, music and *mise en scène*. It is at such points of heightened emotion that the characteristic excesses of the melodrama manifest themselves. At moments of intense drama the melodrama that usually intends to express a strong sense of realism (for example by using the rhetorical conventions of classical Hollywood cinema) surpasses the limits of what can be considered realistic, and results in actions or moments in the film that would be colloquially referred to as 'over the top' (Nowell-Smith, 1987, pp. 72-73).

One of the crucial components of melodrama is 'the pleasure of being touched and giving way to tears' (Neale, 1986, p. 6), and this is a significant element in the structure of Malay cinema. Some of the melodramatic conventions involved in producing tears and

pleasure pertains to the way narrative events are ordered and motivated. Melodramas are marked by ‘chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last minute rescues and revelations, *deux ex machina* endings’ (Neale, 1986, p. 6). Inasmuch as there is little causal preparation for the way events unfold, the generic verisimilitude of melodrama tends to be marked by the extent to which succession and course of events is unmotivated (or under-motivated) from a realist perspective. There is an excess of effect over cause, of the ‘extraordinary over the ordinary’ (Neale, 1986, p. 7). Fate, chance and destiny, therefore, mark a power over the lives of the protagonist and this is evident in most of the films discussed in the analysis<sup>21</sup>. The key to the narrative logic of melodrama is not realism or naturalism but the need to produce discrepancies between the point of view and the knowledge of the audience and characters respectively. This discrepancy is what ultimately produces pathos that results in tears. Timing plays an important role here. Pathos results from a realisation (characters discovering what the audience already knows) that comes too late; ‘tears come whether the coincidence comes too late or just in time, provided there is a delay and possibility, therefore, that it may come too late’ (Neale, 1986, p. 11). Throughout this period of delay, the audience is powerless, as they cannot intercede in order to alter events in the story or the misconceptions of the characters. The consequence, partially due to this powerlessness, is tears. And the longer the audience feels this powerlessness, the greater the emotional impact on the audience when the moment of realisation occurs. Pathos is continually seeking to compensate for the character’s lack of awareness, and in more complex melodrama this process will be extended to a number of characters whose interests do not correspond. Such melodramas become more melodramatic and, therefore, intensify the pathos, by operating multiple viewpoints, hence making everyone a victim (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 64)<sup>22</sup>. Particularly moving moments are the product of a structure in which the point of view of the spectator coincides with that of the character as established by the narrative. A character’s mistaken perception, or lack of knowledge, is rectified in accordance with the spectator’s prior understanding and judgement. However, the effect of poignancy and pathos, while dependent upon this articulation of point of view also depends upon timing. Tears

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<sup>21</sup> Fate, chance, and destiny (*takdir*) are particularly significant in *Anak Halal*, *Sepet*, *Cinta* and *Sepi*, *Black Widow Wajah Ayu*, and *Jalang*, for example, in relation to how an overly intense occurrence in the plot affects the actions of the female protagonists.

<sup>22</sup> Enhanced pathos is predominantly obvious in the multifaceted storylines of Yasmin Ahmad’s films. The suffering and the innocence of a virtuous character (that only the audience is privy to) in *Sepet* and *Gubra*, for example, are intensified by dialogue and background music which add to the sentimental tone and generate tears.

ultimately come from this kind of marking of temporal irreversibility across a structure of knowledge and point of view.

Gledhill, on the other hand, draws attention to an essential paradox in the melodramatic genre. In her comment on Elsaesser's analysis of pathos, she argues that if the melodramatic character appeals to audience sympathy by virtue of the intensity with which she undergoes the experiences offered in the narrative, the audience will not necessarily feel pity for the suffering character. Pathos involves the evaluation of suffering in terms of 'our privileged knowledge of its nature and causes' (Gledhill, 1986, p. 46). This process of assessment is frequently guided by the narrative because although melodrama is chiefly concerned with an intense focus on interior personal life, its characters are not psychologically constructed. Instead of being introspective, these characters convey their inner selves through action, movement, gesture, décor, lighting and editing. As a result, the audience gains knowledge that is not available to the characters themselves. Gledhill's view is in keeping with Brooks' argument about melodrama's revelation of the protagonist's virtue which is misunderstood due to 'misleading appearances, fatal coincidences, missed meetings, etc., all of which point to a misrecognition of that character's nature or intent' (Gledhill, 1986, p.47). Pathos, therefore, emerges as an 'aesthetic activity' intensified by the misrecognition of a sympathetic protagonist because the audience has the advantage of knowing the 'true' situation (see footnote 22).

Like their male counterparts, feminist film scholars were generally silent about the topic of emotion. In the early to mid 1980s, feminists regarded the 'quintessentially feminine emotion of pathos' as the main aspect of women's oppression. Tears of pity or self-pity would not help women in their endeavour to rise above patriarchal power and control. In the process of distinguishing 'properly' feminist distance from melodrama's emotions ... the importance of pathos itself and the fact that a surprising power lay in identifying with victimhood' was not addressed (Williams, 1998, p. 47). Pathos is always in conflict with other emotions in melodrama and it is directly connected to the most compelling, dramatic and memorable action of a film. In keeping with Brooks' line of argument, a 'quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to melodrama' (Williams, 1998, p. 52). This often results in big scenes that portray moral truths and present them didactically to the audience. These moral truths are presented using spoken words or gestures – the 'unspeakable truth' – accompanied by music, and are sustained through physical action without dialogue. This process culminates in a 'melodramatic denouement [which] is typically some version of this public or private

recognition of virtue prolonged in the frozen tableau whose picture speaks more powerfully than words' (Williams, 1998, p. 52).

### **The Melodramatic Tradition in Malay Cinema**

Melodrama has been synonymous with many Malay films since the inception of Malay cinema. Despite some types of Asian films being termed as melodrama there is, however, no actual corresponding word in Asian languages (Dissanayake, 1993, p. 3). Asian scholars and critics have increasingly used this term for the purpose of conceptual clarification of the types of Asian films, especially since literature, drama and cinema have experienced great changes as a result of Western influences. In Malay films, as in most Asian cultures, melodrama has long been closely connected to myth, custom, and religious practice. The concept of human suffering is crucial within the discourse of melodrama and it is considered an all-encompassing fact of life, while salvation is regarded as a liberating experience that stems from an insight into the nature of suffering. A metaphysical understanding of suffering, therefore, is a natural part of the quest for the meaning of life. Another prominent aspect of Asian melodrama that is similar to Western melodrama is the family. Unlike the focus of Western melodrama which is largely on the individual self in relation to the family, it is usually the family as a unit that generates most interest in Asian melodrama (Dissanayake, 1993, p. 4).

There are a multitude of sentimental or emotional Malay films that feature 'class oppositions' (Gledhill, 1988, p. 76) in the form of rural-urban or rich-poor conflicts. Many of these films are also in keeping with Elsaesser's definition of melodrama in 'Tales of Sound and Fury', being a dramatic story in which emotional effects are expressed by using musical and symbolic elements. The musical number, for instance, has been an obvious and important feature in many Malay films right up to the present time and it is very much influenced by Indian cinema and to some extent, the great Hollywood musicals. It is fairly common for a completely serious Malay drama to feature songs, even humorous ones, at the most serious and dramatic moments. This characteristic has been attributed to the influence of the *bangsawan* theatre which included a musical presentation in this manner not just to alleviate tension but also to extend the performance and allow time for the stage crew to change the set. This did not serve any practical function in films but became an element that audiences and filmmakers expected to experience during a dramatic performance.

Numerous Malay films are also closely modelled after Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s. The films of the late P. Ramlee, for example, are not just accompanied by a

stirring musical theme but also by a selection of songs that have become memorable and evergreen classic hits. Some of his musical comedies feature songs that are not part of performances in the narrative but which, unlike *bangsawan*-influenced numbers, expand the narrative by revealing the characters' emotions and intentions. The presentation is similar to the Hollywood musical as non-diegetic background music accompanies the songs while members of the Malay audience suspend their disbelief (White, 1996). On the whole, like its other Asian counterparts, melodramatic elements and other features that influence Malay films embody a blend of tradition and modernisation, illustrating Eastern and Western sensibilities.

### **Indian Cinema Influences**

In the commercial sense, melodrama is not identified as a formal genre in Malaysian cinema. The notion that melodrama functions as a supra-generic mode of address within which particular genres operate has been applied to Indian cinema (Thomas, 1987), one of the main influences of Malay films particularly between 1950s-1970s. In many respects, Indian cinema embodies the literal meaning of the term 'melodrama' (music drama) more than other cinematic traditions. A combination of traditional Indian performance styles employing music and dance with European theatrical forms became the foundation of Parsee theatre and latterly, Indian films. The plays performed in the Parsee theatre reflected the multiple influences of its creation, ranging from Arabic-Persian romantic melodrama to stories from Indian epics, adaptations of Shakespeare to Victorian melodrama, with new material created from Persian and Urdhu sources (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1999, p. 172). The most important contribution to this theatrical form was the inclusion of music and dance into the performance (Karnad, 1989, p. 336). Music and dance had always been central to Indian cultural life and were to remain so irrespective of the actual medium of performance. All of the plays adapted to the Parsee theatre tradition reflected the use of the melodramatic mode articulated via heightened emotion, stock characters, and the combination of music and dance 'to form "music drama" – the literal meaning of melodrama' (Van der Heide, 2002, p. 82). Music is ever present in Indian melodrama, and even in the social films the compulsory songs are visualised to illuminate the themes and emotions of the films and not necessarily to function as a component of narrative drive, which seemed more the case with Hollywood musicals (Chatterjee 1995, cited by Van der Heide 2002).

This legacy is further illustrated in the Indian melodramatic mode of address in the form of 'loosely structured, digressive narratives, where cause/effect, realism and

psychological motivation are of minimal concern, while music and dance as spectacle and the emotional involvement of the audience are of paramount importance' (Van der Heide, 2006, p. 163). The formal strategies of the 'Hollywood continuity system' which is accompanied by the more spectacle-based aesthetics of 'the iconic' and 'the tableau', is derived from the 'frontality' of the Parsee theatre (and Victorian melodrama). Both the iconic and the tableau represent moments of stagnation in the ongoing spatial-temporal momentum of the film, where meanings and emotions are presented to the viewer and/or to a character (Van der Heide, 2002).

Malay cinema derives from the Indian melodramatic plot which centres on a good versus evil dichotomy, which requires a conclusion of 'moral ordering' rather than narrative resolution (Thomas 1995), with the narrative elements of suspense and surprise having little relevance. The archetypal figure of the Mother in Indian films is typically associated with tradition, goodness, and family obligations, epitomised in the mother-son relationship which overshadows all other family links. Evil is personified by the Villain who is usually a polar opposite of the mother figure. The villain typically disregards family relations and indulges in lechery, brutality, and smoking and drinking – actions that signify the West. This melodramatic pattern operates in a number of Indian film genres such as films about mythology, historical events, and the 'socials'. The motif in Malay melodramas mirrors the Indian social films in that they deal with contemporary life, often highlighting the conflict of negotiating family and modernity as a crisis for the protagonist, who may or may not succeed in this endeavour. The historical drama and films that deal with issues of social reform reflect characteristics found in European and American melodrama which feature non-psychological motivation, contrived plotting/coincidence, a strong musical component for dramatic construction, and the portrayal of a Manichean moral universe (Vasudevan, 1989). The function of characters is marked by certain contrasting traits: good and evil; country and town; purity and sexuality; duty and desire; East and West. The manipulation of these binaries is clear in the moral universe of the Indian melodrama which addresses 'the forbidden fears, anxieties, and pleasures afforded by the narrative' in the form of, for example, the attractions of sexuality and the anxiety attached, in the East-West polarity, and in the question of identity (Vasudevan, 1989, p. 41).

A common feature in Indian melodrama is the notion of the image and the look which is central to Hindu culture. The idea of 'seeing' (*darsan*) the divine image is the most vital element in Hindu worship. This perspective on looking can be contrasted to the theory of the gaze in American cinema by writers like Mulvey (1975) who suggest that male power is



expressed through looking at women. In his study of Hindi melodramas, Ravi Vasudevan suggests that looking involves exercising male authority, and he likens the woman's look to that of a devotee (Van der Heide, 2002, p. 165). The *darsan* effect is no less patriarchal than the Mulvey look, but it employs a different cultural paradigm, which can in turn appear as a transgression when the same strategy is used to problematise the authority of the male and the desire of the female (Vasudevan, 1994, p. 121). When the plot revolves around female desire a different nuance is observed in the narration. The transgression featured is unacceptable, and the pressure to see a favourable resolution and the restoration of normality is given priority. The more common female function, however, is to meet the various needs of the male, ranging from the pleasures of sexuality to facilitating the reinstatement of the moral order. One of the best examples of this from Malay cinema is *Perempuan, Isteri & ...?* (U-Wei Hj. Shaari, 1994), which will be analysed in Chapter Six.

The Indian social melodrama had a significant effect on the films made in Malaysia by Indian directors, by Malaysian directors like the late P. Ramlee, and by Yusof Haslam in the 1990s. The Malay films made by Indian directors between the late 1940s and the early 1950s paralleled the song and dance melodramas in Indian cinema of the time. The musical segments in these films and in the Malay films of the decades that followed, however, are more randomly positioned within the plots and are more performance-based than those in Indian films. In this way, the films are more similar to the Mandarin and Cantonese musical melodramas from Shanghai and Hong Kong (Van der Heide, 2002). Since the mid-1990s, the most popular films have been comedies and melodramas about young Malays, starring Malay or Eurasian singers and models. The narrowness of the genres and the ethnic focus in the plots are further emphasized by the fact that the most successful of these films are by either Aziz M. Osman or Yusof Haslam. *Sembilu* (Yusof Haslam, 1994), for example, seemed to contribute to the fundamental aspects of Malay movies that revolve around the lives and romantic ordeals of young Malaysians, often employing the melodramatic mode rather than the comedic approach. Yusof Haslam's *Maria Mariana I* (1997) and *Maria Mariana II* (1998) continues this interpretation of the genre, but places it even more firmly within the area of the Bollywood family genre which features 'lost and found plot; one-sibling moving into crime, while the other joins the law enforcement agencies; the powerful moral function of the mother figure and musical numbers' (Van der Heide, 2002, p. 83).

### ***Bangsawan* Influences**

One of the most important influences upon Malay films is *bangsawan*, the main pre-cinematic cultural form that became very popular in Malaya at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Bangsawan* is based on Persian plays that include songs and music. This perhaps goes some way towards explaining the fondness the Malay lower classes (including the peasant and working classes) have for the cultural elements of India and West Asia, which have long influenced the development of Malay culture (Fuziah & Raja Ahmad, 1995, p. 59). In her book *Bangsawan*, Tan Sooi Beng (1993) examines this popular cultural form in great detail and argues that it functioned as an urban entertainment phenomenon, dealing with its subject matter, its employment of a variety of cultural material and its narrative structuring, and its emphasis on the musical forms.

The importance of *bangsawan* is its direct influence on and interrelationship with Malay cinema, in the context of the multiplicity of its social and cultural connections and, most importantly, because of its major role in the construction of the local film industry. A majority of the films produced in the 1950s for instance featured elements normally found in the formal Indian films which were melodramatic, episodic and contained digressive narratives that focused on family and genealogy, and was continuously integrated with songs and dances. These elements are also part of the *bangsawan* tradition, which contributed to the popularity of Malay films and continued its influence through the presence of actors, technicians, musicians, performers and stories of films in the 1950s. Veteran filmmaker Jamil Sulong (1989, p. 59) acknowledges that most of the films he directed had been *bangsawan* plays. The songs and dances were, as in *bangsawan*, from a wide range of traditions, but their staging was often determined or altered by the Indian directors. The recurrence of garden, forest, mountain and moonlit love scenes which helped create the romantic trope of the pathetic fallacy, in which nature becomes a metaphor for human emotion, is common in Indian literature and cinema (Rajadhyaksa and Willemen, 1999, p. 348).

*Bangsawan* was one of the many new cultural forms which emerged in response to and in the wake of the rapid social, economic, and political changes caused by British colonial expansion into the Malay Peninsula in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Bangsawan* literally means ‘of aristocratic class’, but the term refers to the plays about royalty and the nobility (not necessarily Malay) which are the mainstay of the form. Unlike traditional Malay theatre, *bangsawan* was entertainment oriented and highly commercial. The basic musical expression of *bangsawan* constituted a blend of Malay and Western elements, but also included Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern, Javanese, as well as other foreign elements.

According to Tan Sooi Beng (1993), *bangsawan* had to adapt to the changing popular tastes of the urban population. In the 1920s and 1930s, *bangsawan* was a theatrical arena in which elements of a society, economy, and culture undergoing change and subject to foreign influences were shown to be interacting. *Bangsawan* actively utilised new elements, specifically in its stage setting, plot structure, and character types, but still maintained those which were familiar to both audience and performers and which derived from the traditional theatre that preceded it. The scene types, plot structure, and character types, nevertheless have proven to be a significant influence of films in early Malay cinema, and have played a major role in the melodramatic tradition of Malay films. There was usually one main plot with a number of subplots. The structural movement was more linear, which sometimes led to a climax. In general however, as in musical comedies performed by foreign vaudeville troupes, plots remained less important than spectacular settings, songs, dances, and beautiful chorus girls.

Tan's study indicates that the stock characters in *bangsawan* had specific functions or roles in the plot and this is particularly evident in Malay melodramas up to the present time. Stock characters comprised *halus* or 'fine' characters, usually depicted by the hero, heroine, king, and other such characters. Stock characters also consisted of *kasar* or 'coarse' characters like the villain and the clown. Characters such as the queen, officials, warriors, maids, and villagers performed minor roles. Each character wore a standard costume, though there was some variation in dress depending on the time period and geographical location of the specific play. The characters also displayed a repertoire of standard expressions and movements. The typical characteristics of a hero were that of patriotism, faithfulness in love, and bravery. His main role was to serve the king, to present an image of idealised virtue and patriotism, as well as to rescue a princess from any the perils of the villain. The hero was expected to appear physically strong and show the skills of a good fighter because he had to struggle against the evil villain.

The heroine in a *bangsawan* play was usually portrayed as the ideal aristocratic lady of delicate beauty, who possessed the qualities of pure goodness, timidity, humbleness, patience, and refinement. The heroine had unequalled powers of resistance and an inflexible attitude to chastity, but has to undergo suffering and face trials and tribulations at some point in the story. Her role was to be faithful in love and be totally devoted to father and lover or husband. When faced with an open attack on her chastity she preferred death to dishonour. Occasionally, there was a stronger and more assertive type of heroine portrayed in the form of a princess who was to take over the throne when her father died. Her role was to set up the

conflict between the hero and the heroine's love for each other and their duties to parents and king. In contemporary Malay cinema, the main female protagonist only seems to parallel the *bangsawan* heroine in terms of beauty (i.e. good-looking actresses usually star as the main female protagonists) and the experience of negotiating challenges. The films selected for analysis portray their heroines as exuding a more multi-faceted attitude and approach to patriarchal dictates.

The villain in *bangsawan*, according to Tan's research, typically raised fear in the audience, and was usually portrayed as a thief and deceiver who pursued the heroine persistently. He was also adept at fighting and in the end faced his fate with dignity – corresponding with the morality emphasised in *bangsawan*. The villain's fate was to die or repent and become virtuous. The king was usually the father of either the hero or heroine. He was a person of dignity or elevated sentiment and his character is used to emphasise the moral of the story imparted in his good advice, benevolence and forgiving nature. The comic figure was often a servant who poked fun at the hero and who was sometimes portrayed as a naïve youth. This character was always ready to aid and support the hero in times of trouble. The comic figure was usually humble, lively, and light-hearted, and displayed sensible forthrightness. A significant trait of these character portrayals was not in what was said in their dialogues but in the way it was said, revealing the nature, motivation, and inner feelings of the characters. In times of emotional crises, for example, the heroine made extensive lamentations and sang in a sobbing fashion to provoke the sympathy of the audience. This pattern of characters is still apparent in films of the 1990s onwards.

Tan also points out that through these character depictions, the audience became acquainted with the accepted manner of conduct and behaviour in Malay society. Women were portrayed as refined princesses or comic maids and in this way corresponded to stereotypes of women in traditional Malay theatre (*wayang*). The noble refined woman who was totally devoted to her husband was idealised. An assertive female character was often not positively portrayed and usually died at the end. Occasionally, in plays set outside the courts, the woman was seen to impersonate a man in order to attain education. Such characters signified realism to the performers and audience, further enhanced by authentic costume style that was determined by the location and time period of the play.

A *bangsawan* play also featured exaggerated displays of feeling in some scenes. This melodramatic quality was adapted from Western theatre and film. In moments of emotional crisis, the 'fine' characters sobbed, sang, or fainted. Villains would beat their chests and tear their clothes in an emotional crisis. A reviewer in the *Straits Echo* of 1908 wrote of an

actress's portrayal of emotion: 'Her portrayal of the elementary emotions is really great acting. In fear, for instance, she does not strike a grotesque attitude, with eyeballs rolling in a stage frenzy. No, she feels fear, and makes you feel that she is afraid.' (Tan, 1993, p. 124). Lovers also displayed more emotion and were allowed to touch hands, giggle and sit next to each other. In addition, if a hero disliked a woman he could show it physically. Even dying was an energetic affair, dramatised by groaning, gasping for breath, and stretching of the body, often with fake blood oozing out from the dying character. There was also a distinct level of public emotion in *bangsawan*. Conflicts pertaining to 'love' and 'duty' within the individual, for example, were openly expressed. These conflicts, however, were never truly resolved, as in the case of lovers who were not permitted by their parents to marry never disobeyed their family but died instead. Music also added to the heightening of emotions. Songs or *lagu* were used to stir up mood, establish characters, convey ideas, or accompany action in the plot of the story, and used for specific dramatic situations. Each song had particular elements associated with it to spur the audience to identify the type of scene, character, or mood portrayed. *Bangsawan* also provided the audience with a happy ending, where virtue triumphs over evil. The danger or misfortune experienced by the hero and heroine throughout the story was resolved in the final scene, which often saw a return to the initial setting. *Bangsawan* would end in a tableau that symbolises the victory of virtue over vice and the forces of good over evil, but also stressed the moral of the story and gave the audience time to reflect on it.

### **Conventional Melodramatic Elements in Malay Films**

The golden age of Malay cinema saw films fitting into the categories of tragic love stories, comedies, historical/legend-based tales, and horror (Van der Heide, 2002; Barnard 2005). A majority of Malay films between the late 1940s and 1950s focused on the binary opposition between the city and the *kampung* (Barnard and Barnard, 2002). The essential motif in these films revolved around the Malay community confronting the threats to their traditional lifestyles – illustrated by a romanticised image of the *kampung* against the selfish and individualistic, unbecoming lifestyle of the modern city (then Singapore). The unequivocal break from the past is depicted as a 'binary battle between tradition and modernity, the kampong and the city' (Barnard, 2005, p. 434). The portrayal of this dichotomy, however, did not last as the modernisation of the city proved to be more attractive. The technological development and prospects offered by modernisation, not the least of which included the cinema, provided villages and the rural areas with various images of modernity.

Elements of melodrama evident in the films of these times, as influenced by *bangsawan*, Indian cinema, and classic Hollywood films, are reflected in the depiction of a Manichean universe displaying the co-existence of light and darkness, hope and despair, and good and evil. The narrative plots consisted of sudden changes of fortune, unrequited love, hatred and loss, but also presented a hopeful resolution. The plots featured a mix of active and passive male protagonists, Malay exclusivity, and the narratives presented the inevitable consequences of character interaction. Evil is usually punished and the restoration of order back to a world that had not been affected by the end of innocence and goodness (embodied in a particular character) is evident. Another continual pattern in Malay films of these times is the sudden uncontrollable release of aggressive behaviour (*amuk*) following long periods of resignation to the condition of the world. Many scenes feature medium close-up shots of two characters conversing and/or a series of two shots filmed in shallow focus, or an almost frontal shot – reflecting the *bangsawan* influence. These films also contain a number of song and dance routines, which reflects *bangsawan* origins and which tends to suspend the narrative but continues to be unrelated to it.

One of the more popular melodramatic plot devices was the use of blindness, particularly in tragic love stories. In his study of the golden age of Malay cinema, Timothy Barnard finds that blindness did not only reflect the dichotomy between the village and the city but that it also represented the ‘ambivalence towards attempts to blend the traditional and the modern’ (2005, p. 434). By the early 1960s, however, the metaphor of blindness had altered. This was evident after issues pertaining to independence had shifted to debates about merger (between Malaya and Singapore), identity, as well as economic and social disruption. In such films, the element of blindness is no longer a symbol of sadness but instead becomes an act of mutilation, and a symbol of alienation. According to Barnard, Malay literature on the pre-modern Malay world feature characters who have skin diseases, or have to roam through forests in search of a new home because they have perpetrated a cultural blunder. The use of blindness as a trope for moral failure is unusual in traditional Malay culture, and therefore its use and repetition suggests external influences and modern ideas in Malay filmmaking of the 1950s and 1960s. The shift from using illness as a metaphor and blindness as a trope to a focus on modern issues is illustrated, for example, in *Sumpah Orang Minyak* (P. Ramlee, 1958) which was derived from traditional folklore. Amidst the political changes that were occurring in Malaysia when these films were released, the element of physical disfigurements reflects alienation in the Malay community. Films of the early 1960s portray Singapore/city based characters with exaggerated attitudes and this marks the loss of the relatively subtle

critique of modernity and urbanism of films in the early 1950s. These characters are portrayed as abusing their servants, manipulating their family members, placing financial value on all interaction, and even killing their mothers. The films seem to depict the end of traditional values and this suggests that the ‘moral anxiety’ (Barnard, p. 451) of the early 1950s, in which blindness could be cured, is no longer possible. As demonstrated in *Korban Fitnah* (Kapur, 1959) and *Sayang Si Buta* (Omar Rojik, 1965), alienation is widespread and characters that have regained their eyesight endure painful mutilation as the harsh reality of the modern world is revealed.

Another essential element in the melodramatic structure of Malay cinema is ‘tears’ – a feature inherited from Indian cinema and parallels that of classic Hollywood films<sup>23</sup>. Films from the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Yatim Piatu* (Rajhan, 1952), *Semerah Padi* (P. Ramlee, 1956), *Ibu MertuaKu* (P. Ramlee, 1962), *Dang Anom* (Hussein Hanif, 1962), and *Sial Wanita* (M. Amin, 1969) convey the respective themes and the plight of the protagonist via a sustained depiction of emotive, tearful scenes. In an essay on the ‘rhetoric’ of tears, Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri and Faridah Ibrahim (2004) examine how the action of crying operates in cinematic narratives of male-female relationships and how some films cultivate certain genderised images of crying. They conclude that ‘tears’ are used to evoke audience’s emotion irrespective of whether the spectator empathetically responds to particular tearful scenes. Malay cinema generally portrays women crying more regularly than men; female tears are depicted to flow down the cheeks and male tears swell in the eyes. This reflects the socio-cultural expectation of separate forms of crying that are acceptable for men and women respectively. In most cases, the depiction of crying is connected to sorrow, regret and remorse and almost always suggests feelings of helplessness or weakness in a character. At the same time, in some melodramas like *Pasrah* (Yusof Haslam, 2000) for instance, the heroine’s tears do not reveal a weakness in character but serve as an indication of a resilient woman who defends her principles. Although the depiction of tears is genderised in terms of perpetuating the image of the crying female, films like *KL Menjerit* (Badaruddin Azmi, 2002), produce the image of the emotionally expressive male who still maintains machismo and becomes more attractive to the observing female.

Any discussion on the melodramatic tradition in Malay cinema would be insufficient without delving into the contribution of the late P. Ramlee, the most popular star of Malay cinema. Although he was originally popular as a singer and musician, his role as

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<sup>23</sup> The ‘pleasure of being touched and giving way to tears’ is a crucial element of melodrama (Neal, 1986).

actor/writer/director between the 1950s till the late 1960s makes him an ‘epic hero of prodigious talent who charismatically raised Malay cinema from simply being entertainment to a commentary on Malay society and modernity’ (Barnard, 2006, p. 165). P. Ramlee’s films are often set in a musical world which made singing characters seem natural. In the vital context of a society that was going through decolonization, rapid modernisation, and confronting issues pertaining to race, citizenship, communism, and the issue of the merge between Singapore and Malaya, P. Ramlee played a major part in the pedagogical role of Malay films.

*Penarek Beca* (P. Ramlee, 1955) serves as a fitting example of P. Ramlee’s attempts to impart social commentary by focusing on the conflict between modernity and tradition. He juxtaposed different forms of leisure activities to illustrate the many ways in which urbanised Malays negotiate between the two binary opposites. In this film the image of modernity is represented by activities such as going to the movies, listening to Western music, or engaging in non-Malay entertainment. These activities are also set at night – suggesting darkness – something that Malay culture relates to danger, romance, violence, repugnance and other inexplicable and hidden threats. P. Ramlee’s depiction of modernity features characters that are manipulative and deceitful. These ‘modern’ characters behave impertinently towards Malay traditions and are, for example, attributed with a very loud voice, which is considered rude in Malay culture. The film also presents tropes that are commonly repeated in other Malay films: for instance, the notion that the rich are always suspicious towards the less fortunate; the poor maintain *kampung* values and are concerned and courteous towards others. The extreme juxtaposition of tradition and modernity is enhanced through the *mise en scène* which illustrates an ‘authentic... colonial construction’ (Barnard, 2006, p. 170) of the *kampung* as the setting for characters that are honest and that do not take advantage of the rich. The more affluent characters are depicted as stereotypically the opposite of the poor – manipulative, untrustworthy and insensitive towards *kampung* values – suggesting P. Ramlee’s take on the influence of modernity. His emphasis of these binary oppositions is also reflected and repeated in his camera technique, content of dialogue, differences in costume and the body language of the characters, in order to propagate his message.

P. Ramlee’s *Ibu Mertua Ku* (P. Ramlee, 1962) is another example of melodrama that reflects his skill at ‘integrating a web of transtextual references’ (Van Der Heide, 2002, p. 199). The film is reminiscent of the Indian film *Deedar* (Bose, 1951) in terms of culturally stereotyped characters that (mis)recognise each other through deception, amnesia, or physical afflictions such as blindness. The characters also experience telepathic moments, an element



that is common in Indian cinema. P. Ramlee also employs the process of doubling (mother and son, father and daughter; first love interest and second love interest) and a multitude of ‘mirrorings’ within the film, drawn from Hindi films, Cantonese melodrama, as well as some of his earlier films. Van der Heide points out that the technique used in this film is very similar to *Antara Dua Darjat* (P. Ramlee, 1960) which features the contrast between: *kampung* and Singapore; past and present; underprivileged hero and wealthy heroine; upper class and working class. The depiction of these binaries is supplemented by a repetition of narrative events that refer to the literal meaning of the film’s title itself. The narrative aspects of these films also share melodramatic similarities in the form of the fabricated death of the heroine, and the return of the heroine’s fiancé from Europe (a deceitful character) to highlight the intolerance of the upper classes. P. Ramlee presents the shifts in the tone of the narrative through ‘empty’ shots, and indicates dramatic turns via high-angle shots to imply that the element of fate or God’s will (*takdir*) is controlling the course of events. The main protagonists are seen to perform their pre-determined roles, ‘trapped’ within fate-oriented narrative principles like doubling and repetition – all particular characteristics of melodrama.

In this chapter, I have described elements of Hollywood and conventional Malay melodrama that informs my analysis of the melodramatic effect and emotion in the films that are discussed in the latter half of this thesis. The next chapter describes aspects of the female protagonist that the typology of heroines is based on.

### Chapter 3

## TRADITIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE WOMAN IN HOLLYWOOD AND IN MALAY MELODRAMA

As part of the foundations of my conceptual framework, this chapter follows on from the review on melodrama to discuss the image construction, aesthetic features and ideological stance pertaining to the female protagonist. The following sections begin with Western theoretical perspectives on melodrama's investment in the woman as a patriarchal representation in Hollywood films in the form of the wife, mother, and working woman; the woman in love; and the sexual figure. Discussion also focuses on the ideas posed by Gledhill in 'Pleasurable Negotiations' in which she describes the binary of the heroine as independent woman and victim. This is followed by established academic ideas on the portrayal of female protagonists in conventional Malay cinema from the 1940s to the new millennium. Presenting an overview of the various ways in which both Western film theorists and scholars of Malay films have used melodrama in connection with cinematic portrayals of women is essential in order to place this thesis in the context of existing theory and prior research on female representation, as well as to show how this thesis is motivated.

### **Hollywood Wives, Mothers and Working Women**

Representations of women in Hollywood films of the 1940s and the 1950s suggest that the traditional domestic identity of the woman was challenged by discourses that described femininity in numerous ways. The storyline in 'women's films' often deals with conflicts between different roles and expectations of the woman as wife, mother, worker, consumer, and so forth (Williams, 1998). Films aimed at female audiences particularly demonstrate a change in perspective about the agency of the housewife. In the economic sense, feminine identity in the 1940s was paralleled to unpaid, voluntary and temporary work even though countless of working class as well as middle-class women had jobs out-with the home (Landy, 2001). Culturally, however, femininity became a focal point where new consumer identities were created. What further contributed to the complexities of the representation of the modern

woman in cultural contexts of this post-war period were debates on class, race and nation that affected the notion of female identity (Kuhn in Thornham, 1999)<sup>24</sup>.

In some post-war Hollywood films, the appearance of the modern woman embodies the conflict between the gendered identities of the working woman and the housewife. The construction of an ideology of 'separate spheres', in these films, therefore, suggests an alternative experience of modernity for women (Nancy Armstrong, 1987, p. 3). This gendered modernity was imagined through a separation of home and work that is reliable yet changeable, rather than oppressive and isolating for women. These films explore the gendered division between the public and the private, the workplace and the domestic realm, wherein the home becomes a turning point between differing masculine and feminine worldviews expressed in emotive ways (Kaplan, 2000). The image of the modern working woman became a regular feature of the Hollywood melodramas of the early 1950s, as women became an increasingly large portion of the work force. The motives of female characters who worked outside the home, however, became less associated with necessity than with moral inadequacy (Byars, 1991).

Various Hollywood melodramas in the 1930s-1950s exposed 'the family's internal contradictions' more explicitly than any other film genre (Byars, 1991, p. 134). These female-oriented melodramas drew attention to gendered identity construction at a time when what it meant to be a woman was becoming a controversial issue. Such films focus on communities of women and children (sometimes with the absence of a patriarchal figure) and this motivates the narrative in the form of what is termed as 'maternal melodrama'. The maternal melodrama presents a recognisable picture of the woman's ambivalent position under patriarchy that has been an important source of realistic reflections of women's lives (Fischer, 1996). The self-sacrificing mother, like the one in *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1937), must sacrifice her connection to her children, generally for their own good (Williams, 1987). Several implications of the woman's responsibility for care in infancy and early childhood is also relevant to an understanding of melodrama:

The way in which adult feelings resonate with the emotional atmosphere of infancy; the overwhelming power, attractiveness and hatefulness of the person or persons who tend the body, and support the emerging personality, of the pre-verbal child; and the ways in which men and women differ

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<sup>24</sup> Malay films of the 1990s onwards began to illustrate femininity in more complex ways, particularly in terms of the relationship between modernity and gender construction, as discussed in the latter half of this chapter and illustrated in Chapter 4.

emotionally, and evoke different emotions from others, as a consequence of the fact that the persons who provided this crucial early care for all of us were female (Dinnerstein, 1977, p. xiii).

Discussion of cinematic representations of the mother, however, should explore the interconnections between certain historical discourses about the maternal figure and the changing representation of the mother in films generally targeted for women (Kaplan, 1987). The traditions that shape maternal representations in film derive from 19<sup>th</sup> century stage melodrama, sentimental novels and the literature of domestic feminism. The dominant theme relating to motherhood in classical Hollywood cinema in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is ‘the maternal sacrifice theme and the binary opposites of good and bad Mothers’ (Kaplan, 1987, p. 115). The rare space for the mother to have a subversive position reflects ‘the more heroic or subversive aspects of Mothering’ (Kaplan, 1987, p. 125). Mothers are, for instance, rarely seen working outside the home, or as totally independent of men, unless by force instead of choice. The maternal figure is generally depicted as nurturing, self-abnegating, and yielding to others and this leads to an ‘unhealthy denial’ of self. The mother is also stereotypically the moral guide who has the responsibility of creating happy, fulfilled and well-adjusted individuals in the family by shaping the ‘internal psychic self’ (Kaplan, 1987, p. 126).

In maternal melodramas, the daughter’s psychic and social needs take priority over the mother’s desires and the films reveal the difficulty of distinguishing the mother’s desires from the daughter’s needs. Mothers who are ‘closely bonded positively’ (Kaplan, 1987, p. 126) with their daughters frequently identify their own desires with what is right for the daughter. Patriarchal culture, nevertheless, determines what the mother views as her understanding of the daughter’s feelings. When these two entities do not fall into place, the Mother experiences intense conflict but will ‘most likely choose in terms of what patriarchy deems appropriate rather than what both she and the daughter might actually desire’ (Kaplan, 1987, p. 126). Ultimately, the strength of the woman as a maternal figure is ‘the creation and maintenance of a nuclear family’ (Byars, 1991, p. 166).

In the revival of the women’s movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, feminist film criticism focused on ‘images’ of women in the plots and characters of popular films (Williams, 1998). Apart from attention to the maternal figure and the regular working woman, there was also focus on other stereotypes and social roles of women portrayed in films – the romantic heroine and the sexual figure being the two other images that I

describe below. The critical development in the understanding of melodrama and the woman's film of the 1980s, however, illustrates distinctions between the public and the private inherited from the nineteenth century model of female domesticity. Instead of examining ideological ambiguities in the film texts, ways in which films produce gendered subjectivity (showing women how to be women) is given focus (Gledhill, 2000). Through the address to women in particular historical moments, Hollywood melodrama and the woman's film represents a productive platform in the conceptual framework to analyse ideas about women and the structuring of feminine subjectivity<sup>25</sup>.

### **The Woman in Love**

In relation to the romantic heroine, the conceptual framework partly draws upon Mary Ann Doane's description of the love story<sup>26</sup> based on the 'love story' features of classical Hollywood cinema. Doane suggests that at the micro-level of the love story's signifying process is the repetition of objects, phrases or songs. The love story intensifies repetition as a major device of the classical text. The love story tends to 'transform repetition from a tool of cognition into an instrument of pure affect' (1987, p. 108) to the point where the mere mention of words or objects create an entire scenario of passion and desire. This is in order for the couple to have something distinguished as the 'signifier' of their love and to demonstrate that each love is unique and unrepeatable. The discourse of the love story is also supported by a gendered concept of time which Doane borrows from Barthes, through the assumption that

it is the woman who has the time to wait, the woman who has the time to invest in love. A feminine relation to time in this context is thus defined in terms of – repetition, waiting, duration – which resists any notion of progression (Barthes 1978, cited by Doane, 1987, p. 109).

This logic corresponds to a historical sexual differentiation in which the burden of absence is generally carried by the woman, as Barthes states, 'It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so'. Waiting, therefore, is not a 'proper' subject for narrative, but can potentially be 'productive of narrative' (Barthes 1978, cited by Doane, 1987, p. 109).

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<sup>25</sup>As a tradition of women's films is not apparent in Malaysian cinema, the focus on images of women in Malay film melodrama (in the 1990s and beyond) serves as a valuable take-off point to examine Malay feminine subjectivity.

<sup>26</sup> Doane describes the love story as a 'feminine discourse' (1987, p. 96).

Doane further argues that female desire is another essential premise that constructs the love story. Even if the woman's desire is passive, as indicated by the act of waiting, it still presumes a 'desiring subjectivity' and, therefore, projects absence and distance. The love story is similar to the maternal melodrama in the sense that it triggers 'an entire apparatus of waiting, near misses, separations and accidental meetings' (Doane, 1987, p. 112). And if the woman demonstrates a desire that goes beyond the confines of marriage, for instance, the woman becomes a problematic character (Doane, 1987, pp. 114-115). In relation to desire, unlike the maternal figure that is linked to certainty, the woman as wife or lover is always subject to doubt. As illustrated in the Hollywood films of the 1940s, it is normally the man who commits adultery and steps outside the boundaries of marriage, as only the man can survive such a situation. If the woman commits adultery, however, she has to die.

According to Doane, emotion in the love story, however, is usually revealed by way of the character's vision, as the classical cinema believes in 'love at first sight'. This emphasis on looking fits the highly developed system of point-of-view and glance object editing of classical cinema. The existence of love must, thus, be established quickly because the body of the film exposes the barriers to the fulfilment of that love. This leads to depiction of the woman as a romantic heroine. Doane further argues that the central action in love stories essentially lies in the process of decision-making by the heroine, often over two men who are quite similar. Most of the scenes revolve around and attach themselves to that choice and 'the film suggests that this is the one moment in a woman's life when she is allowed a positive action, when she must choose a man on whom the rest of the actions in her life will depend' (Doane, 1987, p. 106). This notion is drawn from Barthes' concept of the proairetic code which refers to a series of choices made by the central character that gives the narrative the structure of an intricately branching tree. Yet in the love story, choice does not control the narrative route. Instead, the narrative concludes in a choice, indicating that the act of choosing is of climactic significance for the woman and, furthermore, that it is the outcome of a long and difficult struggle<sup>27</sup>.

Such a connection to the concept of time is also obvious in films that do not involve such a process of 'choice'. Doane argues that the connection between the female protagonists to time is illustrated in the passive 'activity' of waiting – at windows, at train stations, in isolated apartments, or waiting for phone calls or letters. In contrast to the idea of 'thickening of time' associated with the suspense film, the love story depends on a thinning out or

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<sup>27</sup> The viability of this idea is discussed in the analysis of *Gubra*, *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, and *Sepi*, for example, which highlights the consequences of the respective heroine's actions/choice within a patriarchal context.

expansion of time. Women in love stories witness departures and arrivals but there is hardly any progression. They live in a state of expectation that is never fulfilled or is fulfilled only in their imagination, and this experience is repetitive and cyclical. Ultimately, according to Doane, the narrative comes full circle and returns the points of romantic significance back to their originating scene.

### **The Sexual Woman**

In relation to the portrayal of the sexual woman, the conceptual framework draws on ideas pertaining to the fallen woman (prostitutes; women who engage in sexual promiscuity), as well as the *femme fatale* in film noir, which are commonly portrayed as the precarious sexual figure in classical Hollywood cinema. Doane (1987) suggests that the problem with excessive female sexuality is that it refuses the stability and security of place and social position. And Kaplan argues that the position of women (as wife, mother, daughter, lover, mistress, and whore), however, 'is so necessary to patriarchy' that the 'displacement' of women upsets the patriarchal system and provides a challenge to that worldview. Women serve as 'an obstacle to the male quest' because they are defined by their sexuality, which is depicted as 'desirable but dangerous to men' (Kaplan, 1980, p. 2). The male character is sometimes destroyed because he cannot resist the woman's enticement, but the film usually restores order 'through the exposure and then destruction of the sexual, manipulating woman' (Kaplan, 1980, p. 3). Sylvia Harvey argues that, in relation to sexuality, the family is also considered as 'the only legitimate arena for the fulfilment of sexual needs' (Harvey, 1980, p. 24).

The fallen woman scenario originates from the 19<sup>th</sup> century dramatic tradition of melodrama which, as Brooks demonstrates, 'suggests polarisation into moral absolutes' (Brooks, 1976, p. 4). Only a few of the fallen woman narratives reflect the conflict between extremes of good and evil, which is a feature of melodrama. Instead, these narratives present moral and psychological complexity. In his study on prostitution as portrayed in Hollywood cinema, Roy Campbell finds that the notion of 'innocence' and its significance for women, regardless of the esteem which patriarchy attaches to it, is an element in many fallen woman films that undermine the principles of Victorian morality. The fallen woman in the cinema is sometimes complicit in her own downfall and often possesses a sense of fun which mitigates her newly acquired cynicism (Campbell, 2005).

Narratives focusing on the sexual woman deal with disturbance to the patriarchal order which occurs when a central female character strays from the familial realm and has to

provide for herself (Doane, 1991). The female character that becomes the fallen woman is usually an innocent victim who has been ill-treated or taken advantage of by (usually) a devious male character, and gets involved with sexually immoral activities (e.g. prostitution) because of a need to survive (Jacobs, 1997). Campbell (2005) argues that in some cases, the female character is tainted by the experience of illicit sex and experiences guilt when she drifts into prostitution or illicit sexual activities. Redemption is possible for the fallen woman through heterosexual bonding or some form of atonement for her sins. Hanson (2007) argues that the main interest of the fallen woman films, unlike the fatal woman of film noir, is the sociological rescue of the woman. The *Encyclopaedia of Film Noir* (2007), however, suggests that the outcome for the fallen woman or the highly sexualised female character is usually death, if the narrative reveals that the female protagonist is inherently corrupt – which also seems a common scenario in melodrama. Patriarchal order is restored either through the control of the fallen woman, who then complies with the dictates of society, or through her destruction. Campbell (2005) suggests that in films which adopt the ‘official’ patriarchal line, the existence of prostitution is condemned, and the woman’s suffering is deemed to be her own responsibility or that of evil characters who do not represent a respectable society. And in some films, prostitution functions as a metaphor for the corruption and alienation of capitalism, which impeaches the woman in the process. Blame is often not placed on the male population that ‘in real life guarantees the prevalence of prostitution by creating a demand for the services it provides’ (Campbell, 2005, p. 383).

In contrast to the visual and narrative representation of the family home is the portrayal of the *femme fatale*. The *femme fatale*, according to Place (1978), exudes the kind of sexuality that she uses to define herself and to manipulate men in order to gain independence from an oppressive family life or relationship. The body, clothing, words, and actions of the *femme fatale*, as well as her ability to hold the camera's gaze create a highly charged sexual image that defies attempts by the men in her life and by the film itself to control and return her to her traditional and ‘proper’ role as a woman. Although the *femme fatale* is usually destroyed, she remains in the imagination as a sexually exciting character who never accepted the role that society had chosen for her. Even in films in which she is actually rehabilitated to a more traditional role, the violence and power of her rebellion against that role earlier in the film overcomes the contrived ending. Both Sylvia Harvey and Janey Place (in Kaplan, 1978) suggest that the *femme fatale* effectively undermines the supremacy of the traditional family and its values in spite of her final punishment or conversion. The dominant image of the



*femme fatale* is one of defiance against the traditional family and the woman's place in society.

### **The Independent Woman versus the Victim**

In 'Pleasurable Negotiations', Christine Gledhill argues that feminist film criticism aims to open up 'definitions and identities' of texts. She believes that this necessitates 'a dual operation' whereby textual and contextual analysis is conducted to determine the conditions and possibilities of gendered readings. The feminist critic would, therefore, enter into 'the polemics of negotiation' in order to make use of textual contradictions and provide a feminist scope of the text (1988, p. 75). Gledhill argues that the socio-cultural aspects of women's history must define understanding of feminine subjectivity. Socio-cultural features, and a realisation of these features as a 'psychically differentiated category' (1988, p. 67), influence understanding of the formation of feminine subjectivity. 'Negotiation', Gledhill believes, is a concept that could bridge the gap between the textual and the social subject. The concept of negotiation implies 'the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give and take' (Gledhill, 1988, p. 67). Gledhill also argues that at the core of cultural negotiation is gender representation – the cultural product resulting from the linking of textual and social subjects. Central to such negotiation is the figure of woman, which has long functioned as 'a powerful and ambivalent patriarchal symbol, heavily over-determined as expression of the male psyche' (1988, p. 76). And when female protagonists have to function in a fictional world controlled by male authority gender conflict is unavoidable.

Although film theory hints at how narrative, visual and melodramatic pleasures are structured around the patriarchal symbol of woman, feminist cultural history reveals that the figure of woman cannot be fixed in her patriarchal value. Gledhill suggests that textual negotiations, however, are also connected to semiotic notions of production, work and process. She points out that what influences textual relations and makes meanings variable is a range of economic, aesthetic, and ideological factors that often work unconsciously, are unpredictable and, therefore, are difficult to control (1988, p. 70). As an analytical concept, Gledhill places the value of negotiation on the notion that it allows space for identities. She argues that analysis of 'fluidity and contradiction' in representations must take account of identities. This entails a contextual reference to contemporary socio-economic, language and cultural struggles in order to define and establish identities in the media which serves as a hub for the production and circulation of (in this case, female) identity. Gledhill points out that the volatile nature of identity has to be taken into account because the continual process of

construction and reconstruction suggests that 'final and achieved' models of representation may not be established (1988, p. 74).

In her essay, Gledhill uses the example of the film *Coma* (Crichton, 1978), a thriller exposing a controversy about organ transplants with a female doctor as its main investigative character. One of her arguments is that a significant source of textual negotiation is positioned in the use of both melodramatic and realist modes. By employing this 'dual constitution' (1988, p. 75), the film text is able to operate both on an imaginary level as a fictional production and on a realist level indicating the socio-historical realm outside the text i.e. the context. Examining the contexts of films, according to Gledhill, determines that popular culture utilises a melodramatic framework to provide 'archetypal and atavistic enactments' (1988, p. 77). This is because the general focus of melodrama, according to the Hollywood tradition, is the moral stability formed out of conflicts between good and evil, reflected in the conflicts of heroine, hero and villain in their socially constructed world. Such conflicts are, however, only valid in a socially constructed world that is recognisable. Gledhill highlights the possibility that the popular melodramatic text is subjected to the 'pressure towards realism and contemporaneity' and thus must also conform to the continually changing criteria of 'relevance and credibility' (1988, p. 76).

Traditionally, the melodramatic heroine, as a character or structure that motivates the plot, usually occupies the role of victim since a typical feature of melodrama is that it focuses on the point of view of the victim (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 64). The actions of the melodramatic heroine as victim, determined throughout the narrative against danger or patriarchal disapproval and opposition, leads to recognition of the truth. Gledhill explains that the use of a main female protagonist as the 'upholder of truth' (1988, p. 77), while conforming to the demands of melodrama, poses questions of credibility and authentication because the film is read as melodrama. The text, therefore, must draw upon the independent heroine stereotype whose role and depiction must be recognisable in terms of contemporary socio-cultural definitions. The process of cultural negotiation thus comes into play in order to achieve narrative credibility.

The ideas proposed by Gledhill incorporated into the conceptual framework for this thesis are as follows: firstly, the melodramatic female protagonist is defined through her portrayal as a victim or a tragic figure. The female character becomes a victim or tragic figure in the melodramatic context as a result of suppression or self-sacrifice that leads to the loss of her agency (Gledhill, 1988, p. 77). The victim or tragic figure in the narrative is also signified by instances which reflect the woman as the upholder of truth; as the expression of male

psyche; and as the reflection of moral (patriarchal) values. Secondly, the independent female protagonist, however, displays agency which Gledhill believes is pointing towards the struggles of real women. These female characters ‘negotiate’ their way through changes in society, as a result of suppression, modernity or religious experiences (Gledhill, 1988, p. 67) and, therefore, cannot be fixed in their patriarchal value (Gledhill, 1988, p. 80). Agency is demonstrated by the independent heroine’s resistance against patriarchal domination. The heroine’s struggle to highlight and maintain ‘truths’, thus, complicates her melodramatic construction as victim (Gledhill, 1988, p. 84).

### **Women in Mainstream Malay Cinema**

In Malay cinema, however, female characters are usually presented in a homogenous Malay world where difference is essentially relegated to the contrast between a traditional and passive woman and her rival, the modern and westernised woman, who is usually punished for her independence/agency. Van der Heide (2002), in his study on Malaysian cinema, suggests that, generally, the identity of the male protagonist in Malay films is also constructed through the conflict between tradition and modernity, a scenario common to perhaps all melodrama. Consequences for the male protagonist usually depend on which female character type is triumphant in the conflict. The male protagonist’s hero status, however, is not weakened by his inaction. Yet neither is the character of the traditional woman ‘valorised’ exclusively for her acquiescent nature. Although the heroine strongly intercedes in the narrative in order to attain the desired outcome for the male protagonist, she also does so for herself, since the male protagonist is not likely to act on her behalf. Such behaviour reflects traces of women’s equality and autonomy in traditional Malay society or what is referred to by Wazir Jahan Karim as ‘bi-laterality’ (1992, p. 5).

In addition to the passive, long-suffering female characters portrayed in Malay films of the 1950s to the 1970s<sup>28</sup> are the independent heroines in films such as *Matahari* (Estella, 1958); *Nora Zain – Ajen Wanita 001* (Lo Wei, 1967); and *Panji Semerang* (Omar Rojik, 1961), a period adaptation of a Javanese text which features a heroine disguised as a man. Assertive female characters are also evident in *Dosa Wanita* (M. Amin, 1967) and *Aku Mahu Hidup* (M. Amin, 1970), films which explore the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ dichotomy and social hypocrisy. In many cases throughout old Malay cinema, strong-minded female characters are chastised for making individual choices, as in *Seri Mersing* (Salleh Ghani, 1961) and *Lancang*

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<sup>28</sup> Some information about these films is courtesy of *120 Malay Films* (2010) by Amir Muhammad.

*Kuning* (M. Amin, 1962), films which present a sympathetic perspective of the ‘female’ plight. There are also films in the horror genre, such as *Hantu Jerangkung* (Basker, 1957) and *Sumpah Pontianak* (Rao, 1958), which recognise power in the portrayal of avaricious female characters.

Malay films continue to explore gender ambivalences as well as to utilise the recurrent theme of a woman asserting herself in the presence of a disinterested man, who is usually the focus of her desire (Van der Heide, 2002). This is often depicted in films with romantic storylines, which have always been central to Malay cinema, and are featured in various genres like melodrama, comedy, historical adaptations, as well as sub-genres that have emerged since the 1980s. In an essay on Malay *kampung* virtues, Joel Kahn (2001) suggests that generational and class-impeded romance in Malay films are popular and seem compatible with the melodramatic mode because of stark contrasts, stock characterisations (derived from Indian cinema and *bangsawan*), coincidence and less emphasis on the cause and effect chain. Although many of the themes, presented in P. Ramlee’s films for example, delve into a variety of issues in popular discourse on the ‘Malay dilemma’, their main appeal is created by romantic plots. Such films generally portray romantic love in a manner whereby obstacles are posed, which the male and female characters have to surmount in order to eventually establish intimate relations (Kahn, 2001, p. 117). Romantic love is, according to Kahn, feminised in much of Malay cinema. The plots tend to feature modern and intelligent daughters in a state of role-reversal with their fathers. The daughters become wise and the fathers are portrayed as dictatorial or foolish. P. Ramlee’s films, for instance, feature women who are empowered by marriage and oppression seems only evident when the marriage is based on economic considerations. Kahn also suggests that the trend that P. Ramlee’s films have cultivated in Malay cinema pertains to the favourable estimation of freedom in the discourse on romantic love and a criticism of coercion or force in the shaping of intimate relationships (2001, p.117-118).

The sensual portrayal of romance in Malay cinema is evident from as far back as the film *Chinta* (Rajhans, 1948). Malay cinema recognises the commercial value of sex in films and, therefore, does not heavily censor sexual overtones. This is apparent in the films of the 1950s, through the presentation of two opposing images of women in Malay cinema that were divided into ‘racun dan penawar’ or poison and antidote. Hamzah Hussin (1997, p. 84), in his memoirs, deems that Malay films of the 1950s feature women with morally unscrupulous characteristics who play the roles of temptress and gold-digger and, as the source of marital disintegration and personified the poison of the world. Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri and

Faridah Ibrahim (1998) drew upon this notion and examined the positive and negative images of female characters in the films from what many consider as the golden era of Malay cinema. Although there were more varied types of negative female representation during the 1950s, vis-à-vis the wicked stepmother and mother-in-law, the 1990s version of the ‘poison’ female character is more inclined towards being highly sexualised and materialistic. The antidote figure of the 1990s, however, is portrayed as pleasant, good-natured and virginal, in the form the ideal love-interest or an affectionate, supportive and sacrificing mother or wife.

In addition, Fuziah Kartini and Faridah (2004) also examined and compared metaphors of ‘the female’ in several Malay films of the 1950s with some from the new millennium and concluded that there are inconsistencies in female representation by the mass media and films. Although female representation in Malay cinema has developed through time, ‘female’ images are still presented in the form of binary opposites – the female protagonist is portrayed as either completely good or totally evil. Conceptually, films in the 1950s such as *Ibu* (P. Ramlee, 1953) and *Juwita* (Hussein Hanif, 1951) link female identity to the home or domestic sphere. The ideal woman is one who remains true to her husband and family in spite of any misery or abuse. A rejection of domesticity meant that the woman would be unable to resist worldly temptations and consequently become too materialistic, seductive and alluring to the opposite sex, and finally die a tragic death, as in *Rachun Dunia* (Rajhans, 1950) and *Bernoda* (Ramanathan, 1956). Fuziah and Faridah also found that in films from the year 2000 onwards, the woman is still presented as an object – but more sexual rather than domestic, as in *Mr. Cinderella* (Ahmad Idham, 2002) and *Laila Isabella* (Rashid Sibir, 2003). Characters portrayed as modern women who reject the ‘male gaze’ are frowned upon by both men and other women, as in films like *Gerak Khas the Movie* (Yusof Haslam, 2001) for example. They concluded that the similarity between films of these two periods is that female characters are seen to be susceptible to material attractions – an insalubrious representation of women which perpetuates a conceptual and cultural dichotomy of men functioning as player/buyer, and women as object. This pattern is even further highlighted in films of the new millennium such as *Jalang* (Nazir Jamaluddin, 2009) that is discussed in Chapter 6 and in Bernard Chauly’s *Pisau Cukur* (2010).

In terms of the sensual portrayal of women, Malay films as a whole tend to avoid controversy by not showing, for example, characters experiencing sexual pleasure. The act of kissing is not allowed on screen, while other images that can be interpreted as erotic in Malaysian culture are also censored. Generally, Malay films have featured ‘women in shower and bathing scenes, women in lingerie or wrapped only in a towel or sarong, women wearing

tight-fitting and short dresses, clingy camera shots of women's bare legs, and facial expressions of wantonness or sexual pleasure' (Khoo, 2006, p. 115). Such instances usually involve an immoral female character or *racun*. Films made by the old Malay studio system did not present overtly sensual depictions of women, and of intimate relationships. There are, however, an abundance of scenes in various films from the period costume or mythology genre that present village women in sarongs frolicking with bare-chested male characters. Sexual references in films like *Chinta* (Rajhans, 1948), *Aloha* (Rajhans, 1950), and *Panggilan Pulau* (Ramanathan, 1954) are also conveyed through the use of dialogue, usually involving a Malay *pantun* (traditional Malay verse) or through images of nature, particularly that of a flower blossoming (Amir, 2010). Female characters are also further linked to themes relating to sexual matters in films like: *Bukan Salah Ibu Mengandung* (Jins Shamsudin, 1969) and *Kasih Tanpa Sayang* (Omar Rojik, 1964) which addresses the issue of sexual infertility; *Kalung Kenangan* (Hussein Hanif, 1964) and *Gelora* (P. Ramlee, 1970) which feature the issue of incest.

In spite of the Islamic preaching activities (*dakwah*) in Malaysia, various images linking sex and women are plentiful in Malay cinema during the 1980s and 1990s. An example of this comes in the form of the sexy secretary who is chased around the office by her employer, as well as the *femme fatale* in *Mekanik* (Othman Hafsham, 1983). Brief instances of lovers caressing are featured in films like *Ringgit Kasorrga* (Shuhaimi Baba, 1994) and *Panas* (Nurhalim Ismail, 1998) but they are depicted in relation to female characters who are portrayed as being highly sexualised. There are also distinctions between the portrayal of sexual desire among men and women. Khoo (2006) suggests that female sexuality or sensuality, although criticised, is visually exploited through the expression of their movements, gestures and bodies, while men's sexual desires are expressed audibly and verbally. Lust-filled older men are portrayed as sleazy and animal-like by their moans and grunts while lascivious men are unattractive looking, and the sexualised women actors are usually young and physically attractive. They usually play the role of prostitutes and Eurasian or Caucasian women. Generally, female characters who stray from the stereotypical idea of the chaste women (*penawar*) and women who engage in vocations traditionally assigned to men are reined in to tow the patriarchal line or controlled through the love of a good man in a heterosexual scenario. Khoo also argues that the sexuality motif, undoubtedly a popular topic with Malay filmmakers particularly from the 1990s onwards, has the potential to undermine narrow moral assumptions in certain sections of Malay society whilst upholding the foundations of the Malay hegemony. Despite the impression of a more liberal government

which allows debates and depictions of sexuality in film and literature, Khoo concludes that the state patriarchal system ensures that all out of the ordinary views or examinations of female sexuality is mostly included into patriarchal order via the conclusion of the narrative.

In an essay on Malay melodramas of the 1980s, Norman Yusoff (2006) suggests that melodramas of this period predominantly highlight the female protagonist as an allegory of the Mahathir era. These include films such as *Esok Masih Ada* (Jins Shamsuddin, 1980), *Langit Tidak Selalu Cerah* (S. Sudarmaji, 1981), *Bila Hati Telah Retak* (Rahman B, 1983), and *Azura* (Deddy M. Borhan, 1984). These melodramas illustrate that the socio-political and economic scenarios in the early 1980s had indeed impinged upon the cinematic representation and (re) construction of gender, as well as upon gender relations, while celebrating and chastising Western ‘modernity’. According to Norman, female representation in films of this period appears to set the benchmark in the realm of modernity and liberalism, when compared with its forerunners in the post NEP era. The melodramas of the 1980s additionally present an underlying critique of the Malay male who has benefited from various pro-Malay government policies. At the same time, these melodramas negotiate new-found ambitions enhanced by the early years of Mahathir-ism and suggest optimistic prospects of further modernising endeavours assumed by the government. Norman concludes that the melodramatic genre, in the context of Malay cinema of the 1980s, necessitates flexibility in defining the melodramatic mode, and may be consistent with socio-economic and political developments. In Malay cinema of the 1990s and the new millennium, the melodramatic genre has undergone some transformation, as the issue of gender construction and Malaysian modernity are mobilised in new perspectives and discourses and is further explored in the film analyses chapters.

In conclusion, I must emphasise that discussion in the subsequent analysis chapters focuses on particular key moments analysed in terms of narrative and visual organisation. In addition to discussion of the main female protagonist is the examination of supporting characters, primarily in their roles as mothers, fathers, rivals, or friends. The relationship between the heroine and the family is examined in terms of how the films negotiate the portrayal of emotional and moral identity, and how familial relationships fit into the larger social and cultural community, which is a key element in melodrama. Examining the familial realm – usually dominated by the maternal figure (real and surrogate) – and their moral and thematic implications, contributes to understanding the heroine’s portrayal. Discussion concentrates on the portrayal of maternal self-sacrifice, internal suffering, and relationships with both son and daughter. Discussion also focuses on patriarchal representatives as part of

the *mise en scène* that forms the male-dominated setting in the films and their relationship with female characters as this also contributes to the melodramatic framework of each film. The examination of these narrative elements helps to better illustrate the construction of the typology of heroines in Malay melodrama from the selected time frame.



## Chapter 4

### MODERNITY AND MELODRAMA: AMBITIOUS ‘NEW WOMEN’ AND URBAN VICTIMS

Melodrama and modernity are two constantly evolving concepts which, despite their semantic extension or perhaps because of it, deserve continuous critical inquiry. The term ‘modernity’ invokes a variety of different meanings and interpretations. The Malaysian mass media seems to have the tendency to equate the notion of modernity with Westernisation. Conceivably, this is a result of the general accord by many scholars that modernity predominantly draws from a European Enlightenment rationalist philosophy stressing on individual liberties, which were ‘the institutions and modes of behaviour established first of all in post-feudal Europe but which in the twentieth century increasingly have become world historical in their impact’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 14). Definitions of Malaysian modernity parallel Western concepts of ‘reason, industrial development, rapid urbanisation, and the rise of individualism or individual freedoms’ (Khoo, 2006, p. 11). It is also linked to the notion of a civil society, materialism and consumer culture, and the development of information technology. Characteristics of Malaysian modernity encompasses socio-economic phenomena creating a distinctively modern sense of dislocation and ambiguity, demonstrated by transitory qualities of an urban culture shaped by developments in fashion, consumer culture, and innovative developments (Felski, 1995).

In the Malaysian context, the relationship between modernity and the nation is often suggested in phrases such as ‘the modern nation-state’ and in the general belief that nationalism is a relatively new or modern phenomenon. Malaysian modernity, since the 1980s, has been constructed as the mode of fulfilling certain nationalist ambitions, as exemplified by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed’s<sup>29</sup> plan to transform the country into a fully developed industrial nation by the year 2020<sup>30</sup>. Equipped with a large skilled labour force and supporting infrastructure,

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<sup>29</sup> Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad was the fourth prime minister of Malaysia who held the post for 22 years from 1981 to 2003, making him Malaysia’s longest-serving prime minister, and one of the longest-serving leaders in Asia.

<sup>30</sup> This refers to Wawasan 2020 or Vision 2020 which was introduced by Mahathir during the tabling of the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991. The vision calls for the nation to achieve a self-sufficient industrial, Malaysian-centric economy by 2020. Equipped with a large skilled labour force and supporting infrastructure, Malaysia aims to consistently attract foreign capital investment. Among the many infra-structural symbols of modernity in Malaysia today are seen in the form of the Multi Media Super Corridor IT hub, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, reputed to be among the most up to date airports in Asia, and the Petronas Twin Towers, the world’s tallest buildings at the time they were built.

Malaysia hopes to attract foreign capital investment. Amongst the many symbols of modernity in Malaysia today are the Multi Media Super Corridor IT hub, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, which is reputed to be among the most modern in Asia, and the Petronas Twin Towers, the world's tallest buildings at the time they were built. To wholly equate Malaysian modernity and globalisation with homogenous Westernisation, however, would be inaccurate, partly owing to the geographical location of the Malay Peninsula which has historically made it the centre of trade and religious cultural exchange between East and West Asia. This is illustrated, for example, in contemporary Malaysian satellite or local television programmes which reflect popular cultural influences from locations such as India, Hong Kong, Japan, and the Middle East, in addition to Britain and the United States.

In relation to the Malaysian nation-state, melodramas produced since the 1950s seem to reflect ambiguities that emerge with the process of modernity. Many of these melodramas portray a vital indication of loss of traditional values, as they are depicted in settings where emerging modernisation of the West is in direct conflict with traditional (Malay-Muslim) values. By the 1980s Malay melodramas began to reflect bourgeois ideology paralleling state dogma and portraying male characters as unappreciative, ruthless, and morally corrupt – generally corresponding to middle-class Malay young men after the implementation of the National Economic Policy<sup>31</sup> (NEP). Such depictions propound subtle criticisms of state policies, for example, some melodramas depict the NEP as the reason that Malay society is divided into distinct social classes (Norman, 2005).

Although contemporary Malaysian newspapers and other forms of the media may equate modernity with Westernisation and may sometimes resist it for that very reason, Malaysian modernity should be understood in a somewhat different manner. Modernity in the Malaysian context can be seen as a 'hybridised or alternative modernity' (Stivens, 1994, p. 81), which is a statement of Malaysian self-confidence that challenges the fundamental notion of Western cultural domination. Modernity also complicates issues about how the Malay population could position its culture and effectively implement certain aspects of a changing world and yet keep hold of its cultural values (Barnard, 2004). This becomes a significant female concern as women are constantly vying for and negotiating their social roles. The problem with the position of women

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<sup>31</sup> The Malaysian New Economic Policy (NEP) or Dasar Ekonomi Baru (DEB) was an ambitious and controversial socio-economic restructuring affirmative action program launched by the Malaysian government in 1971. The NEP ended in 1990, and was succeeded by the National Development Policy in 1991. In practice, the NEP policies were seen as pro-bumiputera, or more specifically, pro-Malay, the largest indigenous ethnic community. Poverty reduction efforts have been seen as primarily rural and Malay, with policies principally oriented to rural Malay peasants. As poverty reduction efforts had been uncontroversial and had declined in significance over time, the NEP came to be increasingly identified with efforts at "restructuring society" efforts to reduce inter-ethnic disparities, especially between ethnic Malay and ethnic Chinese Malaysians.

and gender relations in many post-colonial societies like Malaysia, however, should be considered in light of ‘a natural focus around the personal status of “modern” citizenry and, more particularly, around the place and conduct of women’ (Kandiyoti, 1994, p. 394). Concerns linked to modernity and to tradition are illustrated in various genres of cinematic representations of women.

In the Malaysian context, modernity springs from the West as well as from the Middle East as global cultural influences flow in numerous directions, and the United States ceases to be the main determining entity of universal images but instead becomes one part of a complex worldwide composition of imaginary landscapes (Appadurai, 1996). The Malaysian discourse of modernity is, furthermore, closely linked to Islam, gender and Malay identity, especially since conventional Islamic revivalism has become a modern phenomenon as it began to influence Malaysian society in the 1970s, therefore suggesting that Islam also contributes to modernity as a globalising force. Islamic law (*syariah*), for instance, does extend over Muslims (who are predominantly Malay) even though the legal system in Malaysia is based on English Common Law. *Syariah* law primarily holds sway over aspects of family (marriage and children) which largely affects women and has resulted in some tensions between Islam and proponents of women’s rights in Malaysia. Malaysia, and its film industry, has had to contend with Islamic resurgence and the ‘Arabicization’ of Malay culture which can be witnessed, from the mid-1980s onwards, in the ever-increasing number of Malay women who have donned the headscarf (*hijab*)<sup>32</sup>. For Malaysian women keen on resurgent Islam, wearing the *hijab* and attending religious classes have become class markers as ‘dakwah clothing became a symbol of depeasantisation, a process of class mobility whereby successful Malay women explored their gender identity in modern Islamic terms’ (Ong, 1995, p. 181). This ‘Arabicization’ process is a modern phenomenon and is also a result of the reflexivity of modernity, which is similar to the West in terms of urbanisation, new wealth, and tertiary education. Malaysian films, however, rarely feature women wearing the headscarf in order to attract and appeal to a larger audience, especially since Malay cinematic roots are in commercial entertainment rather than artistic expression (Khoo, 2006).

Malay women find themselves bearing the burden of nationalist, ethno-religious representation in the predominantly male politics of modernity, which usually positions them at a socio-economic and political disadvantage. Wazir Jahan Karim, in her research on Malaysian modernity and Malay women, deduces that young female factory workers have been taken advantage of through their participation in industrial development in the same way as other

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<sup>32</sup> While there are no conscious policies in Malaysia advocating Islamic dress, there exists strong social pressure for most Malay women to don the veil, especially in collective situations such as in colleges and offices, particularly government departments.

women have been victimised by their support of resurgent Islamic movements (1992, p. 228). Modernity, therefore, can give rise to a dual effect. On the one hand, modernity can serve to undermine or weaken Islamic patriarchy when it is linked to Western liberal notions of gender equality<sup>33</sup>. Conversely, modernity in the form of state and trans-national capital relies on patriarchal structures already established in villages in order to recruit young Malay women into the workforce where newer forms of gender hierarchy exist (Ong, 1995, p. 167).

The ideology concerning Malay women and modernity is ambivalent. The dominant subtext of Malay women's magazines, for instance, suggests that Malaysian women are 'producers of contemporary urban culture and middle classness' (Stivens, 1998, p. 109). The images in these magazines are not monolithic, but include a variety of identifications such as ideal mothers (*ibu mithali*), female corporate executives, working super-mums, 'chaste modern Muslim wives' (*isteri mithali*) who are 'keepers of the family and Malay modernity', as well as attractive, cosmopolitan-looking models, actresses and other female celebrities (Stivens, 1998, p. 108). At the same time, these women pursue modern Malaysian goals that include acquiring all the accoutrements associated with modern life – a good education, a respectable career and material goods. Prominent and diverse images of the 'new woman', however, do not only include the successful career woman, but also the dangerously sexualised woman in the form of the factory worker, or the *boh sia*<sup>34</sup> teenage girl who engages in sexual promiscuity (Stivens, 2000). What seems clear at a discursive level, therefore, is that women 'are deployed as metaphors for often conflicting aspects of modernity in popular, religious and official discourse' (Stivens, 1998, p. 93). Competing state and Islamic resurgent discourses tend to use women as 'symbols of motherhood, Malay vulnerability, and as boundary markers in their visions of Malaysian modernity' (Ong, 1995, p. 163).

Discussion on melodrama and the female figure (in chapters two and three) suggests that although film theory hints at how narrative, visual and melodramatic pleasures are structured around the patriarchal symbol of woman, feminist cultural history reveals that the figure of woman cannot be fixed in her patriarchal value. In many Malay films prior to the 1990s, women's roles largely focused on the domestic realm – as housewives, mothers, and obedient daughters (Van der Heide, 2002). This chapter demonstrates the argument that melodrama is an appropriate mode for representing the dilemmas of the modern, urban heroine in films by Shuhaimi Baba, Yasmin

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<sup>33</sup> This is exemplified, for instance, by the controversial authorisation of the Malaysian Domestic Violence Act in 1994.

<sup>34</sup> *Boh sia* – a word that originates from the Chinese Hokkien dialect, now adopted into Malay. It refers to young women who spend their leisure time in shopping malls, hanging out aimlessly, or even acting as pick-ups for other youths or older men (Stivens, 2002).

Ahmad, and Osman Ali. The films selected for analysis suggest that the principal ideology concerning women and modernity in the 1990s and the new millennium has altered and that negotiation is a particularly important feature in the representation of the modern woman.

Shuhaimi Baba's body of work, for instance, is feminist in its approach and has received critical acclaim since the 1990s. Shuhaimi is one of Malaysia's most eminent female filmmakers and her films demonstrate that Malay cinema has experienced development in terms of gender construction and the illustration of Malaysian modernity which has shifted in the direction of new perspectives and discourses. Shuhaimi's independent heroines do not resemble the conventional heroine found in Malay melodramas prior to the 1990s, whose conflict typically relates to family and romantic matters. Instead, her films employ the melodramatic mode as a constructive tool to portray the independent Malay woman of the 1990s as a representation of a hybridised or alternative Malaysian modernity. Her films, discussed in this chapter, illustrate this representation of Malaysian modernity in the form of Mastura, the corporate career woman passionate about aid work in *Selubung*, and Ena, the self-centred starlet in *Layar Lara*. In *Selubung*, Shuhaimi juxtaposes the issue of resurgent Islam against the effects of modernity on the Malay woman. *Layar Lara*, however, peels away the various layers that constitute the modern, independent heroine's character and what she represents through a series of conflicts that provide a more multifaceted side to her persona. The film captures the realities of modernity and its impact on the film industry and pays homage to veteran stars of the Malay silver screen. These films are fitting examples of the notion that modernity in the Malaysian setting must blend elements of religious and cultural identity with socio-economic and political developments. The independent heroines in the films are significant contributors to the Mahathir-istic Vision 2020 dogma that champions educational, infrastructural and economic progress. They represent ideal, modern Malay women who embody a harmonious mixture of traditional values and contemporary attitudes, with no tension and conflict.

The late Yasmin Ahmad (1958-2009), however, is also a noted female film director and screenwriter, well-known for her emotive, nation-building Petronas-sponsored television commercials<sup>35</sup> marking Malaysian Independence Day celebrations. Yasmin's films have received multiple awards both in Malaysia and internationally. Her works are controversial as they portray events and relationships considered forbidden by certain quarters of the Muslim community – for instance, *Sepet*, *Gubra*, *Muallaf*, and *Talentine* (2009) contain elements of interracial romance

<sup>35</sup> Petronas, or Petrolia Nasional Berhad, is a Malaysian-owned oil and gas company that was founded on August 17, 1974. The corporation is fully owned by the Malaysian government and is entrusted with the responsibility of developing and adding value to oil and gas resources in Malaysia. Yasmin Ahmad started producing these commercials for Petronas in 1995. Her commercials — always character-driven and heart-felt — are powerful because of their emotional and nostalgic appeal.

and attraction, as do some of her commercials. Yasmin's works have penetrated the consciousness of the Malay middle-class like never before. Her films suggest that the key instruments of interracial reconciliation that may help in the critical, post-Mahathir period are compassion, tolerance and forgiveness – as plainly and intently reflected by the portrayal of her independent heroines. Her films can be regarded as melodrama of the sentimental kind as they feature emotive storylines relating to family relationships and romance, yet at the same time promote an idea of the harmonious utopia that Malaysia can, or should, one day become.

In addition, I have chosen to briefly examine Osman Ali's action-packed *Anak Halal* which focuses on the lives of marginalised young Malaysian Malays who struggle to make a living, and who, out of desperation, get involved in crime and drug addiction. Osman Ali is a versatile and creative filmmaker noted for his more provocative films such as *Bukak Api*<sup>36</sup> and *Malaikat di Jendela*<sup>37</sup>. Osman's short films have received awards at the Cannes and Rotterdam film festivals. *Anak Halal* itself is based on a short film which won the Best Experimental Film at the Malaysian Video Awards in 2001 and was selected for the Director's Fortnight Session in the Short Film Category at Cannes in 2001. Inspired by the film *City of God* (2002), Osman brings forth issues based on the real lives of young people who spend most of their time under city flyovers and on apartment rooftops with the panoramic Kuala Lumpur cityscape acting as backdrop. The melodrama in this film projects the effects of how the deeper problem of poverty results in involvement in criminal activities (particularly through the male characters) – a characteristic of inner city life – and clearly suggests the film's condemnation of violence, drug dealing and addiction. Despite Malaysia's rapid industrialisation, some sections of Malaysian society have been left behind, with those still trapped in poverty are reduced to a life of hardship and sometimes crime despite post-NEP measures designed to assist Malays. The sometimes massive disparity between rich and poor is illustrated in the depictions of Atikah, and Inderaputera and friends. What ties these characters, however, is the phenomena of drug addiction which is one of the worst scourges to affect modern Malaysian, particularly Malay, society.

The films discussed below present diverse images of the heroine as a modern 'new woman' and as a versatile and complex character who no longer mirrors the archetypal unsophisticated virtuous woman in old Malay cinema, but instead functions as a medium of

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<sup>36</sup> *Bukak Api* is a digital feature-length film about transvestites in Kuala Lumpur, made for the education of sex workers. It presents a raw and gritty narrative about prostitutes and transvestites, and has since been shown worldwide.

<sup>37</sup> In 2003, *Malaikat di Jendela*, which is a short film, was selected, again at Cannes, to be screened at the Short Film Corner.

reflecting the notion of modernity in the 1990s and the new millennium, as well as revealing the essence within the respective films.

### ***Selubung* (1992)**

Mastura, the heroine in *Selubung*, is the film's embodiment of the archetypal modern Malay woman of the 1990s particularly because of the autonomy and agency portrayed in her capacity as a corporate executive and in her ardent involvement with Rescaid. Elements of modernity are evident in various forms throughout *Selubung*. More significantly, the position of the emancipated woman is clearly represented by the portrayal of Mastura, Dr. Sardar, and other minor female characters, whose autonomy is partly a result of their level of education – the opportunity to access tertiary level education, particularly overseas, being one of the products of modernisation in post-Independence Malaysia. The notion of possessing a good level of education and a promising career also includes competence in the English language, particularly among the Malay middle-class, which demonstrates another by-product of modernity. Although a seemingly minor feature of Shuhaimi's films, the use of English is regarded by Malaysians not just as a legacy of their colonial past but also as another example of modernity resulting from the influence of Western popular culture, particularly in urban areas<sup>38</sup>. This facet is also evident in much of Malay cinema since the 1990s.

The plot revolving around Mastura and friends in the initial stages of the story, for instance, is set during their undergraduate studies at the University of Western Australia. The enrolment of primarily Malay students into foreign universities is a testament of the Malaysian Government's education policy (specifically in the 1980s and 1990s) of sponsoring a quota of the highest achieving school leavers to further their education overseas, particularly in Britain, North America and Australia (Gürüz, 2008, p.222). The film further emphasises the link between education and modernity when Mastura later holds a management-type position in the corporate sector back in Malaysia, and displays the characteristics of a successful career woman. The type of education that Mastura received has placed her in the negotiated position of going into the workforce at a higher entry level and provides her with the ability to be financially independent. As a result of modernisation and economic policies to help Malays under the NEP, a significant number of those with rural roots established themselves in urban and suburban areas and became part of the new urban Malay middle-class.

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<sup>38</sup> In Malaysia, although Bahasa Malaysia is the official language, English continues to play the role that the state needs it to perform in that it gives the impression that Malaysia is a liberal and modern nation that embraces globalisation, as reflected in various dialogues throughout the films.

Kuala Lumpur and its infrastructure serve as an essential part of the *mise en scène* representing modernity. Most of the scenes set in the Malaysian capital city feature multi-storeyed office buildings, four and five-star hotels and large modern houses. The cosmopolitan setting contrasts sharply with the scene of the fishing village at the start of the film. The contrast in settings illustrates Malay cultural traditions before the arrival and influence of modernisation, and also points to Mastura's family background and hints at her ties to traditional values. This is suggested, for example, when Mastura attends the *puja semangat* (spirit cleansing) ceremony organised by her grandfather in a fishing village on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, a scene which contrasts to the modern infrastructure of the urban locale that Mastura lives and works in. The bucolic *mise en scène* is the film's indication of the traditional activities practised by rural Malays right up to present times and this enhances the image of old customs and practices, illustrating the contrast between modernity and tradition. By showing Mastura at the spirit-cleansing ceremony, the film portrays an inherent traditional quality within Mastura which co-exists with the modern, sophisticated and westernised urban executive. The resonant sound of the drums played at the ceremony and the butterflies that flutter and perch on Mastura and her grandfather in his hut seems to signify the beliefs and values that are embedded in her Malay cultural roots that consequently define her Malay identity. In the contextual sense, the depiction of rural scenes in Malay films seems to be a way of emphasising a non-Western difference. It reveals Malay rootedness and pride in ethnic identity which is tied to the village community, even though many Malays work in the city, participate in everyday urban activity, and even regard themselves as modern Malays. The depiction of Mastura's connection to the rural scenes is the film's way of illustrating Mastura's sense of belonging and confidence in her roots that seem to equip her with the strength to face the patriarchal ideas of Brother Musa's group whilst at university, and the obstacles surrounding her efforts with Rescaid.

Mastura's autonomy and negotiated position is illustrated through her daily activities and her commitment to Rescaid. And when faced with conflict she is the competent, independent heroine who is stoic and stands firmly by her principles. In scenes showing Mastura's encounters with Brother Musa, for instance, she is portrayed as being neither afraid nor perturbed by his sarcastic and accusatory remarks (see figure 1a). The film projects the Islamic fundamentalist attitude towards modern Malay women through the rhetoric used by Brother Musa with Mastura and her other Malaysian student friends. At the same time, the film enhances Mastura's virtuous character as she does not retaliate by verbally insulting Brother Musa or by passing any judgments on his practices and ideology. Her unfaltering nerve when facing Brother Musa and the fact that



*Figure 1a*

she does not encounter the same predicament as Hani and EJ reflects her upbringing and principles that are, as mentioned earlier, firmly rooted in the moderate Islamic practice that accommodates Malay cultural norms and values and does not recoil from modernity. In this way, the film suggests that the modern independent heroine is able to uphold (her) truth, because both her independence and her virtues do not falter as a result of patriarchal demands (in the form of Brother Musa's doctrine). The film also hints at its position on the influence of religious fundamentalism in its depiction of Mastura's character who, unlike EJ, is not intimidated by the extremist element that threatens to hijack and overturn the moderate Islamic way of life practised by Malaysian-Malays for centuries.

The juxtaposition of Mastura's character with those of EJ and Hani best illustrates the persona and victim binary. The suppression of EJ and Hani's autonomy places them in the position of woman as victim of patriarchal suppression. On a visual level, Hani and EJ appear to embody this notion in their attire. Both characters wear the headscarf; EJ is usually in *baju kurung* (traditional Malay dress), and Hani in loose, long dresses that do not reveal her shape or her body – indications of Islamic female status – contrasting with the Westernised outfits donned by Mastura. But what really defines EJ and Hani as melodramatic victims are their subservient nature, and their physical and emotional dependence on Brother Musa. The narrative reveals that as a result of their involvement with Brother Musa, Hani and EJ possess a restricted amount of independence (they are never seen outside their home without him) and are dependent upon him to support and protect them. Hani, for instance, initially serves to support Brother Musa's astringent philosophies, further depicted in her consistently stern facial expression and remarks. Hani's portrayal illustrates Brother Musa's (patriarchal) control, for despite possessing a medical degree she does not appear to be practising medicine. More significantly, her dependence on Brother Musa results in a tragedy and a turning point in the narrative that contributes to the revival of EJ. EJ's involvement with Brother Musa and his fundamentalist ideas reach a climax when Hani, overcome by jealousy and mental illness, suffocates EJ's baby. This melodramatic image is presented through the scene in which the dead infant is discovered while Hani is crouched in a corner hugging herself, her menacing gaze replaced by an expression of fear and trepidation. The

only clear sounds repeatedly coming out of her muddled speech is ‘I didn’t do it’. In this way, the film offers a sense of emotional sympathy and compassion for EJ’s loss of the baby, as well as a sense of pathos through an awareness of the circumstances that have led to this tragic outcome, as Hani is whisked away to a psychiatric hospital. Hani’s portrayal as victim additionally reflects the film’s view on polygamy. Although Brother Musa bases his polygamy on the missionary goal of saving the so-called ‘weaker sex’, he does not fulfil the actual proviso of complete equality in the treatment of wives, as stipulated by Islamic teachings<sup>39</sup>. His polygamous family unit, therefore, appears rather dysfunctional. Hani, who has the traumatic experience of having delivered a stillborn baby, and who resents the closeness between Brother Musa and EJ is neglected, further contributing to her mental deterioration.

The turning point in the film for EJ which positions her as a melodramatic victim occurs when her baby is killed. The emotionally-charged scene is laced with the anticipation of EJ learning of the incident and consequently by her emotional discovery of her misfortune. More profoundly, the baby’s demise marks a premature end to an important chapter of EJ’s life and further augments her representation as victim. When Brother Musa is unable to support her, EJ has no means of providing for herself and is thus forced to return to Malaysia and depend on her parents, albeit an accepted feature of Malay culture. The validity of her domestic role is diminished as EJ no longer has a maternal identity, and her wifely duties appear to be suspended in the absence of Brother Musa. EJ is subsequently poised between the melodramatic fate of Hani and the negotiated position of Mastura. This is suggested when EJ sits by the seaside, lamenting her fate, unresponsive to the gentle coaxing of her mother. Quite aptly, the image of the sea and the sound of rolling waves contribute to the melancholy-flavoured scene as if to remind EJ of things precious to her that have been washed away and out of her life. At the same time, EJ has returned to Malaysia without the qualifications that would have provided her with the ‘sea’ of opportunities that would have empowered her to develop her agency and further contribute to the modernisation of her society. The reappearance of Mastura in EJ’s life, however, appears to jolt her back to reality and back to the EJ known and loved by family and friends. Away from the restrictions set by her strict, fundamentalist husband, EJ’s character becomes less of a stark contrast to Mastura. As the film progresses EJ’s true character, pre-Brother Musa, re-emerges

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<sup>39</sup> According to Islamic tenets, men are allowed to engage in polygamy with two conditions: 1) a man may not take more than four wives; 2) if a man is unable to deal fairly with four wives he should not marry more than the number that he can be completely just with. The Quran encourages wives to adapt to this situation but does not make it the wife’s responsibility if the family does not remain intact. A woman can also, before marriage, stipulate that the husband is not to marry any other woman.

even though it functions as a minor role in the film. Although the film does not project EJ's character as an example of a modern Malay woman, her involvement with Rescaid and her renewed friendship with Mastura indicate that moderate Muslim Malaysian society still retains the ability to re-embrace those who might have been led astray. Through the melodrama surrounding EJ, the film examines traits exhibited by Malay society in general. Malays and Malaysia are Muslim outliers, on the fringes of the Islamic world, steadfast in their Muslim faith but heavily influenced by Malay customs and tradition. With the resurgence of fundamentalist Islam there exists today a duality in the Malay persona. While one is expected to be proud of being Malay and by extension Muslim, there are those who confuse Islam with Arab culture and believe them to be synonymous. *Selubung* seems to support the notion that indigenous culture and Islam are able to coexist, one does not have to give way to the other.

The melodramatic mode is also employed to give focus to the plight of the Palestinian refugees through the use of a theme song, with lyrics on the subject of helping those in need. The emotive quality of the song is enhanced as it is incorporated into the scene which features a group of women and children (seemingly refugees brought to Malaysia) participate in the Rescaid-organised fund raising concert. To add to the emotional effect, the camera draws attention to the sorrowful expression on the faces of the women and children, while the theme song is sung at the concert, as part of the diegetic sound. The film, thus, utilises music and its emotive articulation of the *mise en scène* to further project a reference to real-life issues concerning Palestinian refugees.



Figure 1b

The film also ends positively after the drama of the bomb blast at Rescaid. As Mastura lies injured in a hospital bed she is healed by both Western and traditional Malay medicine. The magical appearance of the surrealistic butterflies in Mastura's hospital room hints at the meeting of tradition and modernity (see figure 1b). What is significant about Mastura's recovery is that ultimately the modern independent heroine survives as seen in the final scene when she returns to Rescaid, looking proud and confident. The idea of Malaysian modernity and the modern Malay

woman, therefore, is aptly reflected through the heroine of *Selubung* who possesses youth, resolve and adaptability and is able to pursue legitimate and wholesome interests regardless of opposition from society or other patriarchal institutions.

### ***Layar Lara* (1997)**

Popular and critically acclaimed, *Layar Lara* differs from other films released in the 1990s in that it focuses on the film industry in its artistic layers. It contains a film within a film which focuses on the lives and careers of the two film actresses at the heart of the narrative. *Layar Lara* explores how income-generating films are made not for art or for imparting a message but for economic gain, and where the needs of financiers and budgets have to be met before script and quality. Interspersed throughout the film are scenes featuring the ultra-modern, almost Manhattan-like Kuala Lumpur skyline, large parking lots, expensive cars and motorbikes. People are seen almost in perpetual motion, an illustration of modern 24/7 working life. And when not in the workplace, the younger characters frequent the city's neon-lit nightspots. The film also uses director Malik's screenplay on ancestral land development to project the modern attitudes of urbanites. Ideas of the city developers are met with stiff opposition from villagers who wish to preserve their land for agricultural purposes. The screenplay is representative of the contrast between the fast-paced objectives of modern filmmakers and the veteran actors who seem perplexed and out of step with modern life.

In terms of the independent heroine as a modern Malay woman, the portrayal of Ena in *Layar Lara* is generally comparable to Mastura in *Selubung* in that it is first illustrated through Ena's physical appearance (choice of clothing, hairstyle), her pursuit of a career and her confident demeanour. The autonomy that Ena possesses is an outcome of her popularity and commercial value as an actress, demonstrated when she first meets with director Malik and film producer Borhan and effortlessly obtains a higher fee. For the most part of the film, Ena's character is portrayed as a self-absorbed and manipulative *prima donna* who exudes pretentiousness in order to assert her popularity and star status. When Ena encounters a group of fans waiting for an autograph and a photo opportunity at the film set, for instance, she instantly transforms into a showy young starlet – as indicated in the exaggerated way she strolls, almost gyrating past fans and other crew members, in her oversized sunglasses and slight toss of her well-coiffured head.

*Layar Lara* essentially focuses on Ena's relationships on the film set as if to depict her life as one long, dramatic movie in which she plays a multitude of roles but fails to play the right ones at the right times. Alongside the affected disposition and spoilt-brat attitude which Ena displays on the film set and in public settings, are a docile nature adopted in her relationship with Shak, a

sarcastic tongue in her interactions with colleagues, as well as a softer, more genuine side when she aspires to be the kind of artiste exemplified by her heroine, Seniwati Zai (Auntie Zai). Ena appears to constantly assert her agency, albeit to suit her own motives, but chooses to affirm her autonomy over Shak only when she loses her job, this she holds most dear. The film depicts her life as a series of poorly-judged roles and her character as the antithesis of her true self until she meets Auntie Zai.

Despite Ena's outwardly modern demeanour, the film presents several complexities in her depiction as the modern, independent heroine. The first complication is portrayed in the form of Ena's volatile relationship with Shak which greatly affects her work ethic. This is evident throughout the film as Ena constantly makes excuses for showing up late for work or even totally missing shoots because she has been persuaded to accompany Shak. His dislike of the attention that Ena receives from the media and fans clearly undermines her agency as a career woman. As a typically jealous boyfriend who wants his girlfriend to boost his ego and provide him with groupie-like admiration, Shak represents an element of patriarchal control that influences and affects Ena's choices and behaviour. What is complex about this independent heroine is that although Ena appears to be the highly individualised and self-absorbed modern Malay woman in terms of style and outward appearance, she still seems to allow herself to be the pliant subject of Shak's attention and submits to his demands. At various instances, Ena appears to enjoy mischievous fibbing and fabricating excuses to the film crew in order to spend time with Shak and this complicates the attempt to categorise her as victim of patriarchal suppression. Ena's attachment to Shak, nevertheless, presents a stumbling block to the advancement of her career (and autonomy) and affects the way others view her. While Ena is portrayed as seeing herself as a figure of success, her colleagues ridicule not just her exaggerated performance during rehearsals, but more so her unethical and inconsiderate behaviour on the film set. In such instances the film offers a representation of Ena that parodies the modern Malay woman, who appears to be successful but ironically succumbs to the negative influences of a needy boyfriend and lacks the panache and professionalism of a serious career woman.

The film unravels the internal motivation of Ena's agency when her character is juxtaposed against that of Auntie Zai. The depiction of Ena's admiration of Auntie Zai reveals what is at the core of the heroine's persona, which is her desire to be the kind of accomplished actress resembling the revered icons of old Malay cinema. This is evident when Ena re-enacts a scene from one of Auntie Zai's classic black and white films, perfectly mimicking Auntie Zai's speech and mannerisms. And when Ena has a private encounter with her idol, her character transforms from *prima donna* to die-hard fan. The connection between Ena and Auntie Zai is beautifully

portrayed in the scene that sees the two women role-play and coordinate an improvised dance sequence, which cleverly parallels the old and new – the veteran of old Malay cinema and the modern star. This scene enables the film to present the transformation process of the largely shallow and self-centred side of Ena's character by showing that hidden in the recesses of her being is a real love of cinema. What truly propels Ena's liberation, therefore, is not the wealth that stardom offers, but the admiration of a long-forgotten star whose precious acting skills could be incorporated into her own. The film, thus, suggests that Auntie Zai, in both celluloid and real form, is the only entity that provides Ena's character with any semblance of humanity and is instrumental in transforming Ena from spoilt star to team-player.

*Figure 2a*



The transformation in Ena's character reaches a turning point when she is sacked from the film production. The film utilises the scene featuring her letter of termination as a melodramatic moment to depict Ena's dilemma of reassessing her goals and of choosing her career over her boyfriend and to mark a defining point in her process of gaining complete autonomy (see figure 2a). Ena realises that she has to learn to readapt to the community around her by discarding her egocentric shell and insolent attitude, and by showing consideration for other people. What is more significant here is that Ena's independence is not compromised even though she chooses to conform to the kind of behaviour expected and determined by the culture of her immediate community, in order to be reinstated into the film fraternity. By apologising to Malik and the film crew, Ena ends the tension that has existed between her and Malik's film crew, an action that somewhat corresponds with the concept of Malaysian modernity which places importance on cultural identity and social dynamics. More significantly, the film poses the idea that Ena must regain balance in order to be successfully included in an idealised modern Malaysian community, represented by the film crew that allows Ena back into the production. Although Ena undergoes a degree of humiliation in the scene where she apologises to the cast and crew and begs Malik to allow her to continue with the film shoot, Ena rediscovers her confidence and sense of self. What *Layar Lara*, therefore, presents, via the melodramatic moments involving Ena, is an independent heroine who negotiates to resolve conflicts through significant decisions and actions. In this case,

Ena chooses to comply with the norms of the film community in order to be accepted by them and eventually to achieve her career goals and dreams. In this way, the heroine survives, for Ena is reborn into a professional actress once again and becomes a significant part of the film community.

The portrayal of Auntie Zai in *Layar Lara* serves to highlight the distinction between the professional attitude of the veteran screen star and the young commercial actress. The melodrama related to Auntie Zai's character, however, differs from Ena's in that it relates more to her circumstances (fate) rather than action. Auntie Zai is the *seniwati*, a film star in the old studio mould and her portrayal also seems to fit into the idea of both a victim/tragic figure<sup>40</sup> in the narrative as well as referring to Malay cinematic symbols of the past. Through the story of Auntie Zai, *Layar Lara* hints at the reality that modernity and development in the film industry appear to have made little room for the provision of veteran actors involved in the birth of Malay cinema. Auntie Zai's age and illness limit her mobility and comprehension of the so-called modern ways and protocols of present-day filmmaking. Despite her past accolades, she receives no offer of film roles, resides in the lower economic bracket, village-like area of the city, and seeks Daud's assistance to obtain very minor roles for the veteran actors in Malik's film. In this way, *Layar Lara* attempts to uphold the value of the old stars and to honour the true Malay film icons and cinematic icons as represented by Auntie Zai, in contrast to petulant starlets like Ena. The melodramatic portrayal of Auntie Zai involves the use of setting to accentuate the nostalgia of old Malay cinema. Most of the scenes involving Auntie Zai take place in and around her old, stone-built *kampung*-style house, which contrasts with the new skyscraper growing ever taller in the background as if charting the progress of her Alzheimer's-like illness and denoting the ever-increasing impact of modernity. In addition, scenes outside Auntie Zai's house are presented as bright, cheerful almost, but those shot inside it are more dimly lit, displaying old-fashioned furniture and decor, as though indicating the condition of both the house as well as its occupant, Auntie Zai, who has entered the twilight phase of her life.

Figure 2b



<sup>40</sup> Traditionally, the melodramatic heroine, as a character or structure that motivates the plot, usually occupies the role of victim since a typical feature of melodrama is that it focuses on the point of view of the victim (Elsaesser, 1987).

The melodramatic nature of Auntie Zai's portrayal is further depicted through her fascination with the skyscraper. For Auntie Zai, modernity is represented by evidence of the passage of time and the skyscraper that serves to act as a backdrop to her old house is proof of this. More importantly, Auntie Zai's wish to access the view from the top of the building is likened to her desire for one last film role, illustrated in the melodramatic moment in she looks out to the building in the distance whilst singing a song from an old film. The forlorn image of a nostalgic Auntie Zai holding an old film award is framed by the outline of her window (see figure 2b)<sup>41</sup>. Her emotive portrayal is enhanced by the trembling tone of her voice, the mournful tune, and the lyrics on the fulfilment of one's desires, as if referring to Auntie Zai's wish to visit the building and to act in Malik's film. Auntie Zai's representation as a melodramatic figure is also supported by indications of the dementia that has placed her in a time warp with no real comprehension of the effects of modernity and the accompanying changes. This is evident in her letter to the building owner which she has written in the Arabic script<sup>42</sup> instead of the Roman alphabet. In this way, Auntie Zai can be perceived as a tragic figure that is confused by the country's rapid industrialisation, but is fascinated by the tall building. Acting as a lure, the skyscraper offers Auntie Zai the prospect of seeing the world beyond the microcosm of her own little compound which has, since her heyday in the 1950s, become her confining reality.

Further contributing to this melodramatic tone is the film's build-up of emotive scenes that culminates in Auntie Zai's death and funeral. This begins with her sentimental and melancholic reveries where she unexpectedly begins acting out scenes from her films, without realising that she is speaking to neighbours rather than acting opposite fellow actors. In the final stages of her illness, Daud improvises by using one of her film scripts, using the language of the royal court, to persuade Auntie Zai to eat. Finally, the scenes following news of Auntie Zai's death clearly illustrates the film's attempt to evoke emotional response. This effect is achieved through the absence of dialogue and the use of a sentimental ballad as the only non-diegetic sound in the scene when the film crew and veteran actors turn up to pay their last respects to Auntie Zai prior to the interment of her body. The film's use of the theme song and slow motion scenes also successfully intensifies the emotional effect of her demise on the other characters as it continues right through the funeral scene. More importantly, however, it functions as yet another sign of the film's tribute to the old stars, as indicated in the somewhat poetical lyrics of the ballad in the film's background.

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<sup>41</sup> The image of Auntie Zai at the window is significantly reminiscent of shots and images of female characters framed by windows in classic Hollywood films of the 1930s-40s, as well as those in old Malay cinema depicting a female character's sense of longing or despair.

<sup>42</sup> Arabic script, or *Jawi* as it is known in the Malay language, was the traditional script used by Malays in pre-Independence times.



The funeral scene is also flavoured with a melodramatic tinge as a procession follows the hearse through the city centre, marking the film's acknowledgement of other icons of the Malay silver screen who have also passed on or who have been largely forgotten.

Ultimately, as a Malay melodrama, *Layar Lara* illustrates the real impact of modernity on the Malay film industry. The portrayal of Auntie Zai generates emotional response and is a fitting tribute to the old stars that provided entertainment and even provoked introspection within the Malay society through the roles they played on the silver screen. The use of cameo close-ups of veteran actors is the film's way of acknowledging their existence, and their contributions. That Seniwati Zai, an actress that time seems largely to have forgotten, is the role model for a younger breed of actress, serves only to illustrate the older generation's important place in society, as well as Ena's hidden humanity. Ena's admiration of the older actress enhances the underlying message that the older generation are gems of knowledge and life experience.

What both *Selubung* and *Layar Lara* present is an illustration of a hybridised modernity resulting from the elements of cultural identity and religion that permeate the socio-economic and political dynamics of everyday Malaysian life. The concept of a hybridised modernity is essential in understanding the films' portrayal of the female protagonists as modern, independent heroines. The significant conclusion that emerges is that the modern Malay woman is primarily concerned with career choices, emotional relationships, family, and the manner in which to lead a productive and fulfilling life as a respectable member of a rapidly industrialising country. The co-existence of Westernised attitudes and traditional values in the heroine points to the necessary balance and the statement of Malaysia's modern self-confidence that retains traditional practices but liberates the woman from unreasonable patriarchal constrictions. More significantly, the films take on the position that in terms of the Malay woman, modern or otherwise, a balance must be achieved in terms of integration into the community at large. These independent heroines are individuals as well as part of a community, accomplishing a balance between old and new, modernity and tradition.

### ***Gubra* (2006)**

Yasmin Ahmad's *Gubra*, the sequel to *Sepet* (2004)<sup>43</sup>, once again features Orked the modern, independent heroine, this time as a young wife and successful career woman. In *Gubra*, Orked's tale runs parallel with the stories of three other female characters to tell a tale of love,

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<sup>43</sup> *Sepet* is discussed in the next chapter on melodrama and the woman in love. This is because the strong depiction of the love motif in the story makes it a more appropriate film for the romantic framework in melodrama.

betrayal and compassion. In a story unconnected to Orked's, we are introduced to two prostitutes and a muezzin's<sup>44</sup> wife. Temah is the sex worker and single mother who has contracted HIV/Aids, Kiah, also a prostitute, is the young *kampung* girl who endures physical abuse at the hands of her client<sup>45</sup> in order to earn money to send home, while muezzin's wife Maz is the gentle and loving housewife who is friendly and exceptionally kind to the two prostitutes. Although there is no interaction between Orked and Temah, Kiah and Maz, melodramatic tropes are evident in the distinctly common motif of women suffering at the hands of men – a palpable feature in Yasmin's films. The portrayal of the prostitutes is the film's bold way of dealing with an underclass that exists in modern Malay society but is largely ignored – in this case women who have been forced to make a living at the bottom of the moral hierarchy with no male authoritarian figures to look after them, but with only ones who exploit them. In the real sense, Temah and Kiah represent perhaps poorly educated women who have to negotiate a livelihood in the only way they can in times when jobs as factory workers, for instance, are largely taken up by the influx of cheaper foreign workers.

The film's treatment of Temah and Kiah, however, is given a sympathetic tone and therefore creates a sense of pathos over the outcome of their stories. Although their choice of vocation and use of sexuality for financial gain would be deemed immoral and sinful from the perspective of a Malay-Muslim society, Maz and Bilal Li's interaction with these women create and reinforce the feeling of sympathy, real sorrow and horror at their respective fates. Through the portrayal of the muezzin and his wife, normally considered in real life as the more pious and conservative members of society who might be more judgemental and critical of prostitutes, the film presents the notion of true compassion in their portrayals and strongly suggests a re-evaluation of common prejudices. Bilal Li's character is kind, considerate and family-orientated. While one would normally consider clerics and mosque officials as stern, critical and unyielding, Bilal Li is portrayed as approachable and open-minded, as controversially portrayed when he pats and gently speaks to a dog (not commonly practised in Islam)<sup>46</sup> on his way to the *surau* (small prayer hall), or when he responds to the Islamic greeting from the two prostitutes and engages them in friendly conversation. The portrayals of Maz and Bilal Li also suggest that, while an

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<sup>44</sup> A muezzin or 'bilal' has the task of calling Muslims to prayer – in this case Bilal Li.

<sup>45</sup> It appears as though Kiah suffers a beating from one particular customer.

<sup>46</sup> Traditionally, Muslims generally cast dogs to be ritually unclean, although jurists from some schools of thought disagree. It is only the saliva of dogs that is considered as *Najis* (impure). If it touches clothes or other parts of the body, this portion also becomes impure and must be washed. Nevertheless, dogs can be kept outside the house for the purpose of security, farming and hunting.

intolerant and exacting form of Islam appears to be in the ascendance<sup>47</sup> Yasmin Ahmad, still in her own way, advocates and indeed subtly argues that there also exists a more tolerant and compassionate Islam where one's transgression is forgiven and where the 'right path' can be rediscovered, upholding humanity over strict dogma. Where conventional perceptions might have had Bilal Li and his wife condemn the sex workers, the narrative portrays the muezzin and his wife as behaving in a non-judgmental manner, in effect showing the compassionate façade of Islam.

Kiah, who is involved in prostitution in order to help her family, dreams of living in a modern apartment and being chauffeured by a kind husband. The kind of lifestyle that Kiah fantasises about is, in superficial terms, exemplified by Orked's life. Ironically, Orked, the modern professional Malay woman with a middle-class background and who has all the accoutrements of success that Kiah might envy, is betrayed by her own husband who cheats on her with a work colleague. Kiah's own tragedy is the beatings she endures from an over-zealous client and is even more clearly a melodramatic victim when she is killed and her earnings stolen by Ki just at the very point when she is about to forsake her life of prostitution.

Temah is the 'gossiped-about', unwed mother in the school staffroom who is constantly harassed by Ki, her son's drug-addict father, for money. The melodramatic mode is evident in creating a sense of pity for Temah whose image as a prostitute is complicated by her maternal depiction. While she is dressed in the tools of her trade (Western attire) she is also seen conservatively in *baju kurung*, and is portrayed as the loving and attentive mother to her young son, enduring mocking glances and whispers from the teachers at his school. Upon coming to terms with her fatal illness, Temah also makes provision for her son by making Maz promise to look after him. With help from Maz, Temah also takes steps towards repentance and re-embraces her Islamic faith, as illustrated by her Quranic lessons with Maz and their discussion on wearing the *tudung* (headscarf). Although her evening activities are reviled by society, the film's sympathetic treatment of Temah makes it possible for us to hope and anticipate that Temah finds her way back on to the right path and renounce her transgression. The dismal circumstances surrounding Temah are compounded by her discovery that she has contracted HIV/AIDS. This heightens the pathos for the fallen woman who, no matter her intentions or attempts at redemption, must still be punished. The melodramatic fate of Temah culminates in her eventual death. The image of the creaking swing at the film's end reminds us of a previous scene in which Kiah,

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<sup>47</sup> *Gubra* (and Yasmin) met with fierce criticism at the hands of critics such as Faisal Tehrani who writes in his blog '*Gubra* which is Morally Lost and Problematic' that equating everyone in the eyes of God is the devil's work (Khoo, 2008). There was even a fierce debate on Malaysian television on how *Sepet* and *Gubra* are 'cultural corruptors'.

Temah and Maz are seated in the swing eating coned ice-cream, discussing her illness, making plans for Temah's son in the event of her demise and lamenting about what the future holds (see figure 2c). The gentle sway of the empty swing thus marks the tragedy that has befallen the two prostitutes and the child who is now motherless. The treatment of their eventual fate, however, differs from that of the conventional sexual woman (as portrayed by Zaleha in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*, which is analysed in Chapter Six) in that their deaths seem more tragic, and the pathos more intense, as both characters were on their way back to a moral path.

Figure 2c



In sharp contrast to the unhappiness endured by Temah, Kiah and subsequently Orked, we find the very embodiment of domesticated Malay matrimonial bliss and *isteri mithali*<sup>48</sup> in the form of Maz, who enjoys a loving relationship with her husband, Li. Although the portrayal of her character is not multifaceted, Maz appears to be the film's embodiment of the ultimate virtuous woman who has only kind and honourable thoughts and words for others, somewhat reminiscent of Melanie Hamilton (Olivia de Havilland) in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). From the onset of the film Maz and Li are portrayed as being very much in love and enjoy a playful and warm relationship. Despite the unhappiness and crisis experienced by other various male and female characters in the story, the film injects yin and yang into the narrative through the depiction of this married couple. While the strength and stability of marital bliss is projected in *Sepet* through Orked's parents, in *Gubra* it is illustrated through the tender, harmonious relationship not just of Orked's parents but also of Li and Maz who are affectionate and caring in most of their scenes together, and who obviously enjoy healthy marital relations, as indicated through Temah's teasing comment about Li's wet hair<sup>49</sup>. The married couples in *Gubra* – Orked's parents<sup>50</sup> and Maz and Li – provide examples of healthy relationships based upon love and mutual respect. The couples also

<sup>48</sup> *Isteri mithali* refers to the ideal wife from the Islamic perspective.

<sup>49</sup> A Muslim is required to take mandatory ablution following activities such as sexual intercourse. This is especially compulsory before performing formal prayers or reciting verses from the Quran.

<sup>50</sup> This continues the trope of happy and successful marriages that is at the core of a happy and close-knit family introduced in *Sepet* and followed up in *Mukhsin*.

act as stable influencers for Orked as well as Temah and Kiah (respectively) during times of turmoil and conflict, offering solace and hope to these female characters and in the process illustrating the film's stand on the importance of faith and family, unity, and compassion.

As the independent heroine, the narrative presentation of Orked, however, is that of a modern woman in a post-millennial setting. The story reveals that she is a graduate of a British university, a career woman who makes work-related trips to France and a young, affectionate wife who enjoys a comfortable lifestyle with her older 'New Malay'<sup>51</sup> husband. Orked lives in a modern apartment in the former mining town of Ipoh, her husband drives an expensive car and owns a luxury-hobby motorbike, and they enjoy a healthy and fun-loving love life. Orked also comes from a middle-class background (established in *Sepet*) whose family, as well as housekeeper, converse in English as easily as they do Malay. In spite of her seemingly comfortable life, Orked's marriage is tested when she discovers that her husband Arif has been unfaithful with Latifah, his work colleague, making Orked a victim of infidelity and male betrayal. At the same time, Orked's level of autonomy is defined when she chooses not to play the submissive Muslim wife but instead leave her husband. This clearly suggests that, regardless of her exasperation at his lies and treatment, the modern, independent heroine is empowered enough to leave the male 'breadwinner', even when ignoring the husband is considered sinful and disobedient from the Malay-Muslim perspective. Despite the traditional strictures of her religion, Orked the independent heroine is imbued with the confidence to follow her own path and assert her authority and independence to end the marriage. The portrayal of Orked can also be viewed as a rejection of an Arabicised version of Islam, advocating rigid separation of the sexes and overt male-centric role that is dominant in Malaysia today, further emphasised by her friendship with Alan. While Arif tries to placate Orked, claiming that the other woman meant nothing, the intelligent heroine retorts: "That's the problem with you Malay men, you think women are stupid" echoing Orked's (and *Gubra*'s) sentiment and attitude introduced in *Sepet* about the oppressive and chauvinistic nature of some Malay men in relation to the emancipated actions and agency of a Malay woman<sup>52</sup>.

It also seems only through melodrama that Yasmin's characters and idealised world can truly exist. *Gubra*, like its predecessor *Sepet*, also tackles the issue of interracial ties, as

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<sup>51</sup> New Malay or *Melayu baru* refers to a community of Malays who have experienced both mental and cultural reformation and are knowledgeable, sophisticated, trustworthy and competent to meet the challenges of modern times (Norman, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> In *Sepet* Orked argues for her interracial relationship with Jason: 'for generations Malay men have been marrying outside their race. Now a woman wants to do it, everyone's flapping'.

exemplified by the independent heroine's ability to better relate to and engage with the male 'other' – clearly demonstrated in Orked's friendship with Jason's brother Alan. As in *Sepet*, this is something that Orked is not quite able to accomplish with male representatives of her own race, bar her own father. The independent heroine's liberal and non-racist mindset is evident in the immediate connection enjoyed by Orked and Alan (see figure 2d). In a post-Mahathir Malaysia, where race relations appear to be increasingly placed under the microscope, Orked acts as an agent advocating greater understanding among ethnic communities. At the same time she also functions as a vehicle for the non-Malay Alan, allowing him to vent frustrations resulting from the unrequited love he has for his country, Malaysia, as Alan states: "I don't know if you guys realise how hard it is for the rest of us (non-Malays) to stay here sometimes. It's like being in love with someone who doesn't love you back." Orked's portrayal suggests that this love can be reciprocated – although it will require struggle, compassion and compromise from all parties.

Figure 2d



The independent heroine is therefore the channel of Yasmin's ideal post-modern Malaysia: attractive, tolerant and accommodating. This idea, first envisaged in *Sepet* is later sustained in *Muallaf*. What is also evident as the film's standpoint is that despite differences in race as well as religion, there is one tie that binds all Malaysians regardless of ethnicity – a common humanity. This is particularly obvious in a montage of various characters praying but in different ways (see figure 2e) – Alan and his daughter in church; his parents at a Buddhist altar; and Maz and Temah in the surau – with lines from the Christian and Muslim prayers alternating and ending with a Quranic verse (al-Imran 3:194) translated into: "And do not forsake us on the day of judgement. Verily, You are not a breaker of promises."



Figure 2e

As in *Sepet*, the melodramatic mode is again useful in recreating the passionate yet sentimental connection that Orked feels for Jason, particularly when the scene of Jason's death at the end of *Sepet* is repeated when Orked first meets Alan. The notion of a promise, suggested in the lines that Maz recites in the inter-faith prayer montage, also connects to Orked's comment about how humans are bound to break promises, as she tells her husband: "I promised I'd stay. You promised Abah that you would never hurt me. And Jason promised that he'd never leave me. It's modern times *sayang* [my love]. No room left for all these things [promises]". This suggests a bitterness that has resulted from losing Jason (in *Sepet*), something the heroine would never be free of, and is enhanced in the scene in which an emotional Orked, with Alan, peruses through the unsent letters from Jason and the photographs of them together. Even the final scene of the film astonishingly ends with Orked and Jason seemingly married and waking up in bed together to a phone call from Orked's mother. This melodramatic moment appears to be an overly romantic facet to the narrative and perhaps even to the heroine's character. It suggests that in that moment, Orked is living in another dimension with her true love, negating the trials and tribulations of Orked as portrayed in the narrative, in order to produce the perfect alternative ending that might prove more gratifying for Orked and perhaps for us the viewers.

Ultimately, *Gubra* holds up a mirror to Malaysians and asks them to re-examine their prejudices and stereotypes via the portrayal of Maz and Li who show the prostitutes and the dog compassion; and through the story of the prostitutes whose lifestyles we condemn yet also sympathise with once their plights as victims are revealed. Like her advertisements, Yasmin uses her film and heroine as a didactic tool to urge her fellow Malaysians to question what she feels may be shallow preconceptions and attempts to reveal what makes us all the same under the skin, and our common humanity, as implied by a quotation from the Sufi poet Rumi in the frame at the end of the film: "The lamp may be different but the light is the same."

### ***Anak Halal* (2007)**

The film's exploration of social ills, the by-product of rapid modernisation, is interspersed with the motifs of family relationships, friendship and love. The narrative is presented through three time frames charting the story of Inderaputera (Putera), commencing briefly with him in his infancy when his drug-dealer father Hisyam entrusts the eccentric Mariam with his care. The film forwards on through Putera's childhood and highlights the strong bond he enjoys with Mariam and childhood friend, Jo, before focusing on the young adult Putera who makes a meagre living as a mechanic whilst sharing a low-cost apartment unit with Jo and her mother Mak Leha. Although Putera appears to be the main protagonist, it is the film's portrayal of the female characters and the depiction of the themes of friendship, poverty, addiction, and paternal neglect and abandonment that make *Anak Halal* a fitting illustration of how the melodramatic mode is utilised to illustrate modernity and its impact. The female protagonists in the film represent modern young women who are caught up in the maladies associated with a rapidly modernising society. Their portrayal in this film adds to the wide-spectrum of urban female protagonists in films of the 1990s and the new millennium.

Johanna (Jo) is the compassionate independent persona who functions as Putera's close confidante and moral compass throughout the narrative. Tomboy-like, Jo, like a typical 'minah motor' (biker girl) is adept at riding and driving two and four-wheel vehicles. She is feisty and ever ready to defend herself and her friends; she is one of 'the lads' and as a result enjoys the respect of her mainly male peer group. The depiction of her relationship with Putera borders that of sibling affection and romantic love, as suggested when Jo trims Putera's hair and the two engage in physical playfulness that is at times flirtatious. Jo and Putera are almost always seen together –her protectiveness and true feelings for Putera are revealed when Atikah's character is introduced and captures Putera's interest. The film's projection of Jo's character is conveyed in a favourable manner – she is virtuous, well-liked and does not compromise her morals or resort to law-breaking in spite of her socio-economic circumstances but instead earns an honest living by helping Mak Leha at their fruit stall. Despite her feelings for Putera, Jo is even-handed in her treatment of her rival for Putera's affections. She also challenges Datuk Farid (Atikah's father) when he prevents Atikah from socialising with Putera and their friends and she even provides Putera with tips on how he might be more romantic. Jo's caring nature is also portrayed in her concern for Erzan and Milya's predicament with Tajul and his thugs. Jo, at times, also functions as a maternal-like figure, for example when she pleads with Putera to make amends with Erzan when they fall out over Atikah's drug addiction, or installs the help of her friends to help Erzan and



Milya with debts owed to Tajul, and when she tries to prevent Putera from resorting to violence to avenge the deaths of Erzan and Atikah.

Milya, Erzan's younger sister, and everyone else's surrogate sibling, becomes a victim of Erzan's folly when she is raped by Jeff, Tajul's henchman, looking to terrorise Erzan into paying his debt. Milya and Erzan's lowly socio-economic status is illustrated in their living conditions at the low-cost flats as well as Milya's threatened expulsion from college, the result of Erzan's inability to pay her tuition fees. Milya is a representation of the vast number of modern young Malay women who pursue tertiary education in order to secure employment in an increasingly globalised and competitive market<sup>53</sup>. Successfully completing her tertiary education would also boost Milya's autonomy and social status, as Erzan points out when he chastises her for wanting to drop out of college so as not to burden him financially. As their parents are deceased, Erzan assumes a paternal role and is the one Milya both looks up to and depends upon for shelter and protection. Erzan's inability to repay the debts owed to Tajul results in his catastrophic spiral into a world of violence and drug addiction that results in tragedy when he is shot, leaving Milya to cope with the loss of her only remaining family member and depend on the compassion of Jo, Putera and their friends. The financial turmoil affecting the siblings is illustrated in Erzan's dilemma over his inability to fulfil the role expected of him, as Milya's guardian, and therefore offers his services to Tajul in exchange for Milya's continued safety and well-being. The stark visualisation of Erzan's predicament is seen when Tajul makes him kneel and kiss his hands in a slave-like manner. Erzan's humiliation is further exacerbated when he is made to snort cocaine before being instructed to sell drugs at his soft-drink stall. The film amplifies Erzan's quandary with a close-up of him grim-faced clutching a packet of what appears to be marijuana, as though aware of his bleak future (see figure 3a).

*Figure 3a*



In contrast to Jo, Atikah is the attractive, friendly daughter of a wealthy businessman whose independent persona is depicted through her modern, physical appearance and lifestyle. Atikah does not discriminate who she mixes with, as evident in her interaction with Putera and his friends who are not from the same social class, and her involvement with drug dealers like Ijam.

<sup>53</sup> Milya has obviously not attained a scholarship or higher education loan which is offered by a number of state and mostly private establishments.

Apart from her role as Putera's love interest, Atikah is essentially a tragic victim of drug addiction<sup>54</sup>. Atikah's sense of isolation stems from the lack of attention from her father who blames the influence of 'wild' youths (*anak liar*) like Putera and his friends for Atikah's behaviour. This is illustrated in Atikah's altercation with her father after he posts bail for Putera and friends, when she points out that Datuk Farid's main concern is for his reputation as a titled member of the upper reaches of Malaysian society rather than alienation and neglect experienced by his daughter. The film thus illustrates that despite all the material comforts life has to offer, Atikah is not able to enjoy the basic sense of belonging and confidence that is obvious in Jo, whose close bond with Mak Leha, Putera, and their friends provide her with self-belief and support.

The ineffectiveness of the paternal figure in Atikah's life is highlighted when Datuk Farid discovers Atikah in a 'stoned', unconscious state in her bedroom with pills strewn all over her bed – he appears to look annoyed and does nothing to revive Atikah or show concern for her well being. In his brief appearance in the narrative, Datuk Farid is portrayed as an insensitive and biased man who fails to understand that the reason for his daughter's addiction is closer to home. He also represents the judgemental nature of Malay society over youths like Putera and his friends who are perceived as negative elements of society. This is also suggested through Jo's outburst at the disco raid when she rants at the press camera for their superfluous depictions of young people from a deprived economic background. In contrast to Datuk Farid, however, Erzan displays more of an understanding of Atikah's addiction as when he helps her get a fix under the bridge (see figure 3b) and tells Putera to look after Atikah. Mak Leha also accepts Atikah's presence in her home and expresses her delight in the cheerful atmosphere of having many people living under the same roof. Putera, in turn, patiently deals with Atikah's addiction as when he comforts her on the rooftop when she displays drug-related outbursts and suffering. Atikah's addiction is given a melodramatic treatment as when she hallucinates being pursued by a steamroller. Her predicament also allows the film to present a chance meeting (coincidence) between Hisyam and Putera when Putera attempts to save Atikah from being raped by Jeff – a moment which prefigures their tragic reunion near the film's end.

With the introduction of Atikah – the narrative spirals into the seedy world of moral corruption that accompanies drug addiction<sup>55</sup>. The focus on this motif is underscored through the

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<sup>54</sup> This tragic element is enhanced by the fact that a majority of drug addicts from the Malay ethnic group are male (97.97% in 2006) according to the National Drug Agency Malaysia.

<sup>55</sup> Drug addiction has been recognised as a serious problem at an epidemic proportion in Malaysia since the early 1970s. The National Anti-Drug Agency reported in 2008 that two of the top reasons teenagers cited for using drugs were peer influence and curiosity. Despite Malaysia's economic growth, and what some would deem as stringent penalties, the numbers of drug addicts

*Figure 3b*

melodrama involving Erzan and Atikah, in various scenes showing their respective conflicts and crises, to reveal the powerful impact of debt and drugs on friendship and family relationships. The film generates a melodramatic effect through various excessive elements as illustrated by dynamic chase scenes, physical brawls, and shootouts, featuring a level of violence and realism that is not commonly seen in contemporary Malay films<sup>56</sup>. The compelling image of drug addiction permeates the movie and reflects the disease that afflicts Malaysians from all walks of life. This is exemplified when Erzan witnesses the dreadful state of addicts getting high in an abandoned warehouse and he flees the scene out of fear and disgust. The melodramatic manner in which the film shows the destruction caused by drugs is also clear when Atikah, in a 'high' state, prances around on the rooftop during a fireworks display evident in the city skyline before jumping off (see figure 3c) – the pathos enhanced through the image of her flying in slow motion, in a white (pure) flowing dress, and with a serene expression on her face. The excessive portrayal of violence further contributes to the melodrama as when Milya is raped and in the image of Milya repeatedly stabbing her rapist when Putera and friends manage to overpower the gangsters. These events also allow the film to transform Putera's character from a rather one-dimensional hero to that of a ruthless avenger who takes matters into his own hands and retaliate against the cause of Atikah's death and the intimidating circumstances involving Erzan and Milya.

*Figure 3c*


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are stark. If one examines the ethnic breakdown of addicts, then reality is that the vast majority of addicts are Malays. The profile of drug users detected by the National Drug Agency Malaysia in 2006 is 69.48% Malay.

<sup>56</sup> Due to its extensive socio-cultural hold, the melodramatic mode not only generates a broad diversity of genres but also draws other modes into its processes of articulation. Elements such as action and sentiment are drawn into a 'composite aesthetic dramatic modality' (Gledhill, 2000, p. 230).

Amidst the conflict and turmoil of economic and social depravity, the film also infuses its stance on the importance of family values, as conveyed in the distinction between Atikah's tense and restrained home life and the camaraderie that exists between Putera, Jo and their gang who are bound together by the shared economic status that makes them take care of and look out for each other. The film highlights the dysfunctional nature of the protagonists' families through the absence of a responsible male role model in the lives of these young characters. Jo does not have a father on the scene while Putera is raised first by Mariam and later grows up with Jo and Mak Leha. Hisyam in turn is not attributed with the capacity to assume the paternal role on account of his criminal record and his ignorance of Putera's whereabouts till the end when it is too late. Instead, the film portrays the likes of Putera and Erzan assuming the paternal-like role of protector by relying on their own judgements and value system to survive and to care for their respective families (womenfolk).

The film also indicates the significance of the maternal figure in the portrayal of Mariam who enjoys escaping to the land of Malay literary legends and whose love and adoration of the infant handed to her by Hisyam inspires her to name him after a prince from these legends<sup>57</sup>. The value of maternal influence is enhanced through the absence of a mother in Atikah's life which contrasts to Jo and Putera who enjoy maternal comfort from the love and support shown by Mak Leha (and Mariam when they were children). Although Mariam's character is only visible at the beginning and end of the story, the film illustrates the significance of her character and projects the importance of maternal love and nurture through the loving references made by Putera to Mariam. The emotional tie that Putera has with Mariam is evident when he reminds Jo of the manner in which Mariam would hand-feed them, and when he and Jo sing the song taught to them by Mariam. The strength of the maternal (familial) bond between Putera, Jo and Mariam culminates at the end when Putera flees Hisyam's compound after their brief and tragically emotional meeting and takes Mariam with him. This bond is powerfully illustrated in the final melodramatic tableau (very much an influence of Indian cinema) of Putera, Jo and Mariam, huddled together on the ground staring into police headlights (see figure 3d). A sense of irony and pathos is reflected in this moment as it echoes the scene when Hisyam engages in a shoot-out with the police at the beginning of the film. Hisyam's arrest separates him from his son Putera who in

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<sup>57</sup> According to classic Malay literature, Indera Putera was a handsome and brave prince who used his ingenuity to defeat an evil giant in order to obtain a precious, magical stone from a beautiful princess.

this present scene is briefly reunited with his beloved *bonda*<sup>58</sup> (Mariam) only to face the possibility of separation from her all over again.

Figure 3d



The *mise en scène* in the film aptly reflects the economic contrasts, and the drug problem that haunts these vulnerable young adults. The setting – showing the disparity between the cosmopolitan KL skyline dominated by the Petronas Twin Towers and the likes of Atikah's well-appointed, upper middle class house against the Pudu Prison in Kuala Lumpur, low-cost flats, alley ways and stalls under the flyover – explores the inequalities and the existence of a marginalised underbelly in the vibrant capital city. In this way the film aptly highlights the poverty that is still prevalent in a political system that, for decades, has favoured Malays by contrasting Atikah's affluent lifestyle – clothes, car, and luxurious home – against the hardship that Putera and Jo, and Erzan and Milya face in their less advantageous environment. Indeed in most of the selected films that are set in the city, the pristine skyline and decidedly middle and upper-class dwellings are related to protagonists who promulgate the view of a progressive, modern state. *Anak Halal*, however, bravely points to the incompetence of a socio-economic system that has resulted in a social underclass that delves into delinquency, crime and drug addiction.

The title of the film, according to Osman Ali, was chosen to reflect the innocent and 'pure' (in reference to *halal*) quality of young people who, because of life's cruel fate (*takdir*) and misguided decisions, bring about social problems in society. This is signified by the incessant cry of the baby (Putera) and the shot of his innocent face at the very start of the film – a blank canvass that awaits direction and influence from family and society. Osman believes that in spite of their errors, society should not conveniently treat these marginalised groups of young people as the scum of humanity. Instead they should be given a second chance and society should endeavour to determine and understand the reasons behind their plight and (mis)behaviour. Osman draws attention to the pervasive nature of drug addiction within the lives of these characters as a means of highlighting the inhumanity perpetrated against them and how this affects the progress of the nation. The film is an illustration of how Malays today are facing challenges to their culture,

<sup>58</sup> *Bonda* is the royal term for 'mother' and it is what Putera calls Mariam, in keeping with her love of Malay legends on princes and princesses.

identity and morality – the likes of which past generations never had to confront – without the anchor of *kampung* and extended family and religious influences and stability. The growth of urban centres and migration to towns means that ties of culture, tradition and religion, though still strong are loosening and leaving certain sections of Malay society cast adrift. It can be argued that a strong central government can help channel Malaysia's growth and development of the people, but seem instead more concerned with the trappings of modernity and less ambitious with the nurture of wider society who are not able to keep pace with developments around them and failing to grasp hold of and live the 'Malaysian dream'. This lack of a moral centre in the government is signified in the form of Atikah's father who showers her with all the wealth but not moral guidance, support, and attention which results in Atikah succumbing too readily to temptation. The less prosperous Putera and Jo, however, who struggle in many cases for survival, are not precluded from enjoying a sense of camaraderie and family. The didactic element of the film, therefore, also points to the notion that the paternalistic nature of conventional Malay society needs to be reinvigorated (paternal government/Atikah's father) and ensure that comfort and progress (modernity and Westernisation) are nurtured appropriately.

### ***Muallaf* (2008)**

*Muallaf* explores the possibility of emotional survival from a traumatic experience through forgiveness and spirituality in the portrayal of its modern, independent heroine. The film presents various poignant moments with a clear emotional quality that advocate compassion through the kind and solicitous acts of the heroine, in her dealings with other characters, particularly the non-Malays/non-Muslims, and finally, in her forgiving treatment of her abusive father. The film pays tribute to friendship, mercy, and to accepting one's (painful) past in its depiction of and in the story surrounding sisters Rohani (Ani) and Rohana (Ana), and their friend Brian,<sup>59</sup> who comfort and enlighten each other. The melodramatic mode is utilised in a sentimental manner to promote the theme of forgiveness and compassion which permeates the storyline concentrating on Ani who enjoys a tender, almost maternal, relationship with younger sister Ana, while negotiating the trials of raising her sister away from the comfort and security of a supportive family. Various moments in the film project this loving rapport between the sisters. For instance, Ani makes a habit of repeatedly and playfully kissing her sister's cheek at random moments, particularly after they conclude their prayers (see figure 4a). Their humorous banter reflects their close bond and concern

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<sup>59</sup> Brian is portrayed as a Malaysian-Chinese who is attracted to and forms a friendship with Ani.

for each other. The sisterly-maternal role that Ani assumes is also movingly depicted when she gently informs Ana not to overtly cite chapter numbers and verses from the Quran as it upsets those around her, particularly the non-Muslims. She refers to the ‘yielding’ quality of water and asks Ana to forgive and not hold ill-feelings towards anyone who has hurt her.

Figure 4a



The affectionate relationship between Ani and Ana, therefore, largely contributes to the affective tone of the film creating a sense of pathos for the sisters who are missing their dead mother but carrying out the principles that they have obviously inherited from her. At the same time, Ani’s advice to Ana and her manner of caring for her sister points to the importance of a loving family relationship that Yasmin places on the well-being of an individual. The didactic nature of this film is also clear when Ani says, “People are afraid of things they don’t understand”, suggesting that the heroine is an agent of mindfulness and tolerance towards the sensibilities of others, particularly those from a different race and religion. The kind-heartedness and sincerity displayed by the sisters are also evident when they visit and read to Mei Ling, the victim of terrible abuse who lies comatose in hospital<sup>60</sup>. Even the film’s official poster presents a distinct image of their closeness, their white prayer costumes indicating the purity of their characters and their faith. The didactic nature of Yasmin’s films is again hinted by the lines in the poster: ‘*Dengan keampunan kita dimaafkan*’ (my translation: ‘By forgiving, we are forgiven’), suggesting the magnanimous and merciful qualities that are advocated in Islam and demonstrated particularly by the independent heroine in the course of the narrative.

Like *Gubra*, *Muallaf* is also set in the town of Ipoh (a location familiar to Malaysian viewers as the setting for both *Sepet* and *Gubra*) and does not focus on modern skyscrapers, images of a cosmopolitan lifestyle and infrastructure as indications of modernity. The film’s attitude towards Malaysian modernity appears to link the idea of nation building with interracial relations – and is projected through the portrayal of Ani. As part of the *mise en scène*, the story is mostly set in the large colonial-type villa which the sisters occupy and Ana’s missionary school

<sup>60</sup> Muslims believe that reading the Quran to those in poor health helps to soothe and revive their soul.

building to create a nostalgic feel for Malaysia's colonial history that is responsible for its present multicultural makeup. The predominant use of white – in the clothing of the sisters, Brother Anthony's cassock, the bungalow, Ana's school and the chapel building – complements the theme of forgiveness and appears to point to the virtues and again the 'pureness' of the heroine. The use of this colour also supports the notion of starting over with a 'clean' slate, as presented at the end of the film which features Ani forgiving and reconciling with her father, while Brian, who has overcome his 'issues', also visits and reads to Mei Ling in the hospital and, more significantly, attempts to improve the relationship with his mother.

In contrast to *Sepet* and *Gubra* which contain the use of pop music, *Muallaf*'s use of more solemn music also contributes to the melodramatic feel of the narrative. Mozart's aria from Don Giovanni functions as a non-diegetic accompaniment to reveal a sequence of events relating to Ani and Ana: it begins with a moment in the chapel where Brother Anthony kneels in prayer seemingly for the sisters after visiting them at home; which then shifts to Brian perusing the Quran he borrowed from Ani before he is interrupted by a phone call from his mother; and then to Ani's stepmother weeping in front of a mirror as if lamenting her disillusionment and misery over her husband's depraved behaviour; before the scene shifts directly to her husband experiencing a stroke whilst dancing with various women in a nightclub; and ends with the battered Cindy's<sup>61</sup> unexpected act of kindness as she sends Ani an envelope full of money. In addition, Ani sings praises (*salawat*) to Prophet Muhammad while riding on her scooter, and 'Amazing Grace' dominates the final scene in which Brother Anthony welcomes his congregation into the chapel – both tunes seemingly designed to induce an emotional response or a connection from viewers. The use of these familiar tunes, to Muslims and Christians respectively, also implies the inclusive quality of the narrative to point out shared sentiments and practices between members of the two faiths.

Ani's independent persona is demonstrated in her quest for knowledge and spirituality as she is keen to further her studies in theology. She also stresses to Ana that they need to receive formal instruction in Islamic knowledge rather than rely on various interpretations of Quranic verses – revealing both the importance of her faith as well as the need for firm foundations to ensure that she and her sister do not become victims of negative influences. Ani's portrayal as the proactive, independent heroine and her protective instincts over her sister is most evident when

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<sup>61</sup> Cindy, Ani's colleague at the bar, gives the impression of being jealous of Ani's rapport with the punters and the bar owner. She tells the bar-owner that Ani has been persuading customers to drink mineral water instead of alcohol by emphasising the negative effects of the latter. When the owner tells Cindy to sack Ani, she tries to placate the owner and urges him to reprimand her instead. When Ani's father's henchmen come looking for Ani, Cindy does not reveal her whereabouts and is beaten up by them.



she stands up to her father's cruelty and flees to Ipoh with Ana, biding her time until she is able to access her trust fund which would allow her financial stability. Ani is even, despite her Islamic faith, willing to take up waitressing in a pub to ensure that she can support school-going Ana, despite Ana's disapproval and the immorality attached to the job (from an Islamic perspective).

Like the heroines in *Sepet* and *Gubra*, the conflict involving Ani pertains to patriarchal suppression in the form of her controlling father who regularly gets drunk and who has a foul, abusive temper. His hypocrisy is evident when he refuses to shake the hands of the private investigator which has been licked by a dog<sup>62</sup> but he gets drunk and engages in licentious behaviour with other women in nightclubs – something *haram* (prohibited) in Islam. The melodramatic element of excess is apparent in flashback moments that illustrate the father's brutality – when Ani's father grabs her by her long, luxurious hair and cuts it all off. The image of the melodramatic victim is apparent when Ani appears with a bald, shaven head, complete with nicks visible on her scalp, but still manages to comfort Ana. The film also parallels Ani's ill-treatment with Brian's, revealed through a flashback of when Brian's father leaves a young Brian in the nude by the side of the road as punishment for perusing 'adult' magazines and masturbating. This melodramatic trajectory is again evident in the scene when the girls' father and his henchmen abduct Ana from her school. The emotional and adrenalin pumping atmosphere is heightened by the distressing screams of both Ani and Ana, and the attempts of Brian and Brother Anthony to physically stop Ana's capture. It aptly concludes with the image of a sobbing Ani sitting on the ground looking defeated and is again the victim of her father's cruelty. But true to the nature of Yasmin's modern, independent heroine, Ani immediately reverts to her positive and proactive nature when she tells Brian to look after her cat as she was heading to Kuala Lumpur presumably on a 'do-or-die' mission after her sister.

In contrast to her father's abuse, Ani finds kindness and enjoys intellectual conversations with Brother Anthony<sup>63</sup>, Ana's Christian headmaster who demonstrates concern for the girls' well-being. He (and Brian) visits the girls' home with the intention of accompanying Ana until Ani returns home from her pub job. He also helps Ani obtain a waitressing job in a Japanese restaurant as it is safer and so that she could be with Ana in the evenings. Like the plots of *Sepet* and *Gubra*, Yasmin does not present stereotyped non-Malay characters that are part of the setting of a story. Instead the non-Malay characters in her films share the same complexities as the Malay ones – highlighting them as kind-hearted, thoughtful and displaying no misgivings about helping and

<sup>62</sup> See previous footnote on Islam and dogs.

<sup>63</sup> Brother Anthony appears to be from the Malaysian-Indian ethnic group.

interacting with the Malay characters – as if to dispel any (Malay) myths or misunderstanding about the dubious agendas of the ‘other’ race. And through Ani, the film presents an endearing image of the Malay-Muslim independent heroine’s flair and ability to engage positively with fellow Malaysians from other ethnic groups and, more significantly in this film, from the Christian faith. Despite her philosophical Islamic fervour, Ani reveals her knowledge of the *Tao Te Ching*<sup>64</sup>, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*<sup>65</sup> and even cites from *1 Corinthians 13*<sup>66</sup>. This element of ‘inter-faith’ quotation, merged into the fabric of the film adds credence to the role of the independent heroine as a more intellectual medium able to bridge the racial divide in Malaysia.

The film is as much about Brian as it is about Ani and this is evident in the focus on how Ani develops a warm friendship with Brian who is embittered by the traumatic childhood incident delivered by his strict father. Ani accepts Brian’s offer of a handshake after he drives Ana home even though he is not her *muhrim* (relative), agrees to go on a dinner-date with him (with the proviso that Ana comes along), trusts him with the safe-keeping of the house while she is away and acts as a confidante who provides him with profound yet sentimental encouragement to

Figure 4b



improve his relationship with his mother (see figure 4b). Ani’s actions of entering into a friendship that verge on becoming an interracial romance would be frowned upon by certain sections of Malay-Muslim society, and it is partly what makes Yasmin’s stories controversial to some, but is the film’s illustration of a modern, independent heroine who is openly connecting with the racial other. Although Ani cites random verses from the Quran that suit the occasion, she does so in a way that does not intimidate Brian, thus making her more appealing to him and by extension, to all non-Muslims. The film, nevertheless, does not fully develop the romantic

<sup>64</sup> *Tao Te Ching* is a classic Chinese text possibly written around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC by Laozi or Lao Tzu (‘Old Master’) – fundamental to Philosophical Taoism.

<sup>65</sup> This is an autobiographical work containing 13 books by St. Augustine of Hippo. The book outlines his sinful youth and his conversion to Christianity.

<sup>66</sup> *1 Corinthians 13* from the Bible covers the love that Christians should have for everyone.

possibilities of Ani and Brian's relationship. The melodramatic mode seems more of use in the depiction of the heroine's empathetic and benevolent nature, and her search and love for spiritual understanding and affirmation, as well as for interracial/inter-faith harmony.



Figure 4c

Yasmin's films are politically progressive, intellectually evocative, yet blatantly sentimental. What her films reflect is that the female protagonists are placed in cinematic moments which reflect notions of modern life or global culture that veer towards melodrama and focus on the power of emotions. In the case of *Muallaf*, this is reflected in the portrayal of the modern and independent Ani who comes full circle when we see her in a *tudung* (headscarf) in the final segment of the film which tells us that she has decided to help care for her father who has suffered a stroke (see figure 4c). This contrasts against the image of Ani with long hair prior to leaving her father's home, with shaven head as a result of her father's cruel punishment and with the short crop she has throughout the film. Crucially, despite abuse received at the hands of her father, this moment in the film points to the heroine's forgiving nature – she has come to terms with her role in life as a caring and filial family member, even more crucially she is doing this out of her own accord. The portrayal of the independent heroine, therefore, epitomises the integral part that the twin notions of compassion and family continuously play in Yasmin's films.

Yasmin Ahmad's thought-provoking films in the new millennium are profoundly connected to the issues of national identity, racial antagonism, as well as tensions between secular and religious parts of Malaysian society albeit with a sentimental tone that reveals a humanist poignancy. Yasmin portrays her modern, independent heroines as passionate, contemplative, and intelligent women who strive against Malay patriarchal oppression and successfully negotiate relationships with non-Malay characters. These independent heroines are portrayed as attractive to non-Malays because of their tolerance and compassion, indicative of qualities that Malays should possess and exhibit in order to live more harmoniously with other ethnic groups who also call Malaysia home. Despite harsh social realities, the melodramatic mode is employed to portray the independent heroines overcoming cultural differences and promoting a peaceful, politically correct

notion of a modern, multi-racial Malaysia conducive to national pride. Yasmin maintains that her films are intended to present a humanist perspective and a 'collection of memories' merging the instinctual and emotional aspects of human behaviour: "We just want to tell a story. Or to put across a feeling we have about humanity, as we observe it"<sup>67</sup>.

The question remains as to the consequences of how modernity relates to melodrama and to the depiction of the Malay woman of the 1990s and the new millennium. As a melodramatic text, films are subjected to the pressure of realism and contemporaneity and thus must also conform to the continually changing criteria of relevance and credibility. However, melodrama's over-investment in the woman, combined with the unrealistic expectation of actually living it, produce a complex and highly ambivalent area for women (Gledhill, 1988, p. 76). The films discussed in this chapter have employed the melodramatic mode as it generates emotive pleasures to encourage Malaysians to act positively to the modern trials and tribulations they are confronted with. In the context of their films, this is evident in the portrayals of female prowess in the independent heroines as 'new women' functioning as a utopian reflection of real social changes of gender perspective in Malaysia. The filmmakers' emphasis on active female courage and competence is, however, tempered by images of female victimisation. This binary of female power and peril reflects extensive cultural ambivalence about the variation in social definitions of womanhood. By using melodrama, their films focus on key consequences of modernisation, particularly 'the expansion of female mobility and circulation in the heterosocial public arena of urban modernity' (Singer, 2001, 14).

Arguably, the issue pertaining to cinematic representations of the modern, independent Malay woman in these films is whether narrative organisation and character depictions via the melodramatic mode alone are enough to lead to transformative progress in the Malaysian context. Compelling notions of religious and cultural identity, socio-economic development, as well as race and gender in Malaysia cannot be dealt with entirely in either aesthetic or emotional terms without allowing ideology to enter into the discussion. It might seem less demanding, however, to appreciate the films in terms of human relationships and individual psychology at the expense of political and social context but this is where melodrama, as a modern cultural expression, plays a role. Even if the situations and sentiments in melodrama challenge all categories of verisimilitude and are completely unlike aspects of real life, the structure of melodrama has a truth and a life of its own (Elsaesser, 1972). By adopting melodramatic techniques, these filmmakers have put a

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<sup>67</sup> Yasmin Ahmad, "Film and Feeling" *The Storyteller*, Blog: August 22, 2006, [http://yasminthetstoryteller.blogspot.com/2006\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://yasminthetstoryteller.blogspot.com/2006_08_01_archive.html)

finger on the texture of their social and human material to highlight profound, underlying dimensions of the urban heroine's experience. In the context of contemporary Malaysian-Malay films, the use of melodrama triumphs over repression, and provides expression to the magnified passions – the intensity of love and hate that dwells within humanity – and reveals the reality of the Malaysian psyche.

## Chapter 5

### ROMANCE AND MELODRAMA: HEARTBROKEN PRINCESSES AND SENTIMENTAL SUPERWOMEN

The love motif has always been largely central to Malay films, and is featured in various genres such as drama, comedy, historical adaptations, as well as sub-genres that first emerged in the 1980s. To a great extent these films feature a dramatic story in which emotional effects are generated through musical and symbolic elements (Elsaesser, 1972). As indicated in the introduction and Chapter Three, my analysis of the films' portrayal of the woman in love maintains Gledhill's idea of the independent heroine. The films selected for analysis in this chapter are essentially love stories and my discussion focuses on how the conflicts negotiated by the heroine are depicted using melodramatic aspects. More specifically, this analysis looks at how elements of the love story suggested by Doane are employed in the construction of the heroine and in the depiction of emotional dilemmas negotiated by the protagonists in terms of how familial traditions, norms, and external forces are portrayed affecting interaction and romantic relationships.

Once again, I have chosen to discuss two of Yasmin Ahmad's films – *Sepet*<sup>68</sup> and *Mukhsin*<sup>69</sup>. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, apart from the quality and the recognition given to her films, Yasmin's multi-cultural vision and her emphasis on shared humanity that is projected through her independent heroines and through melodrama, make her films particularly suitable for discussion. The heroine of *Sepet* pierces through cultural barriers in an examination of what it means to be truly Malaysian, while the heroine of *Mukhsin* gives us a nostalgic look back at the notion of first love and youthful innocence. I have also selected Saw

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<sup>68</sup> *Sepet* won the Best Asian Film Award at the 18th Tokyo International Film Festival (2005). It had previously won best film awards at the Ninth Malaysian Video Awards (2004), the 27th Creteil International Women Directors Festival in France (2005), the 18th Malaysian Film Festival (2005), and the Global Chinese Golden Arts Awards (2005).

<sup>69</sup> *Mukhsin* has won Best Feature Film at the 57th Berlin International Film Festival (2007) under the children's film category, and has one special mention at Generation Kplus Children's Jury Awards. It was also an entry at the San Francisco International Festival (2007). The film was made in 12 days and attained a final gross of RM 2 million at the Malaysian box office.

Teong Hin's<sup>70</sup> *Putri Gunung Ledang* as it essentially juxtaposes the heroine's quest for true love against the restriction of duty. This big budget period extravaganza which combines action, romance and fantasy, has since been developed into a successful musical<sup>71</sup>, and is widely regarded in Malaysia as a 'feminist' film. In addition, I have opted to include Bernard Chauly's *Gol & Gincu*<sup>72</sup> and Khabir Bhatia's<sup>73</sup> *Cinta* and *Sepi* to illustrate the manner in which Chauly propagates female gender issues and how Bhatia generates emotional catharsis through the melodramatic structure and stylistic devices within these films. Both *Cinta* and *Sepi*, respectively, are a collection of tales rolled into one film and not all the stories centre on a female protagonist. I have, nevertheless, chosen to include these films as examples of how melodrama successfully generates affective response in the viewer within a mixture of storylines that focus on both female as well as male protagonists.

### ***Sepet* (2004)**

*Sepet*, the first instalment in the Orked trilogy, is an interracial love story that seeks to encourage reflection of attitudes to race relations in multi-cultural, modern Malaysia. The provocative title of this film immediately seeks to get to the heart of the complexities of a multiracial society dominated by the Malay race and Muslim religion<sup>74</sup>. The linguistic variety in the film's dialogue adds to the interracial flavour created by the setting. All Chinese characters in the film speak Chinese dialects (Cantonese and Hokkien), as well as English and Malay. This reflects the real life scenario in Malaysia, where the dominant race, the Malays, mainly speak only Bahasa Melayu (Malay) and English, while the other races speak their mother tongues, as well as English and Malay. On a more political level the film hints at the notion that linguistic imbalance seems to compensate for racial imbalance. What the 'other'

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<sup>70</sup> Saw Teong Hin is best known for winning the Best Director and Best Screenplay Award at the Malaysian Film Festival 2005 for *Puteri Gunung Ledang*. Thus far, he has only directed two films – *PGL* and *Apa Kata Hati?*

<sup>71</sup> Thus far *PGL* remains the first big-budget Malaysian movie at USD \$4 million. It won Best Film at Malaysian Film Festival (2005) and was Malaysia's official entry for the Foreign Film category at the Academy Awards (2004). The film has participated in Bangkok International Film Festival (2005), 61st Venice International Film Festival (2004) and 48th San Francisco International Film Festival (2005). The musical, based on the film, ran for two seasons at the Istana Budaya, Kuala Lumpur in 2006, and for a third in 2009. It has also been specially performed in Singapore and Indonesia. Tiara Jaquelina who starred as the Princess in the film, also played the role in the musical.

<sup>72</sup> Bernard Chauly is part of the independent film movement in Malaysia. Like some of Yasmin Ahmad's films, *Gol & Gincu* is his 'crossover' film into the mainstream commercial cinema of Malaysia (McKay, 2007). In 2010, Chauly attained more commercial success in mainstream cinema with *Pisau Cukur*, another rom-com highlighting contemporary female issues in Malaysia.

<sup>73</sup> Originally from India, Khabir Bhatia has produced and directed corporate commercials, television programmes in Malaysia, Singapore and India. His films and TV dramas have enjoyed widespread success in Malaysia.

<sup>74</sup> The word *sepet* means to have single eyelids. Its pejorative meaning – slit-eyes – however, implies a racial stereotype used by Malays and normally refers to the 'otherness' of the Chinese ethnic minority group which Orked seems to overcome.

race might lack in numbers is made up for in their linguistic ability, echoing a crucial aspect of Frantz Fanon's opinions on colonialism suggested in Orked's explanation that the 'powerless' speak more languages than the dominant group.

In terms of attitude and quality of character, the depiction of Orked largely fits into the mould of Gledhill's independent persona as Orked's assertive nature is evident when she shatters cultural taboos by becoming romantically involved with Jason. My discussion on how Orked is portrayed as a young woman in love, therefore, is closely linked to how the film depicts her as independent heroine. Orked is the seemingly perfect representative of a multiracial Malaysia, which in reality could possibly exist only in some policy-maker's imagination. While her Malay friends distinguish things in terms of ethnicity, Orked betrays no signs of subscribing to racial stereotypes, telling her friend Lin: 'you like who you like lah'. The film presents the wider Malay community's conservative reaction through Izwan and Jo's rejection of Orked's relationship with Jason. Even Orked herself is seen to realise the sensitivity of her bond with Jason when she points out that women who marry outside their race are frowned upon by society. The film illustrates her confidence and fortitude at negotiating her romantic position when she reacts to Izwan's racist and sexist onslaught in the schoolyard by calling his remarks 'big talk from a little man'.

Through Izwan's presumptuous and snide comments, the film illustrates a patriarchal system that believes in its inherent right to reprimand their womenfolk, in this case Orked, for having a Chinese boyfriend. Although Orked's altercation with Izwan points to a clear image of her portrayal as the independent woman, it also exemplifies the kind of setback and conflict – mainly a result patriarchal control – that a romantic heroine faces. The inner recesses of the Malay male psyche are reflected through Izwan's accusation that Orked is 'just one of these stupid Malay girls who thinks she's too good for her own race'. The resistance of the heroine to patriarchal arrogance is however enhanced when Orked harangues Izwan by hitting home with a truth that 'for generations Malay men have been marrying outside their race. Now a woman wants to do it, everyone's flapping'. Izwan's sexist leanings are further refuted by Orked who rebuts his pro-Malay rationale by disclosing Johari's attempt to take physical liberties with her. The film shatters the Malay male's role as de facto guardian of female religious virtue and exposes hypocrisy when Izwan dismisses Johari's action as asking for a mere kiss and announces 'that's what girlfriends are for'. That Izwan is ready to turn a proverbial blind eye to Johari's disrespectful behaviour, while feigning outrage at Orked's association with Jason, serves only to add weight to the film's portrayal of his racist and chauvinistic leanings. And when he cannot refute Orked's argument and accept her



independence, and his pseudo-patriarch role has been threatened by Orked's agency, he retaliates by calling her a *boh sia* (slut). What the film significantly propounds here is the merging of the interracial motif with the issue of patriarchal oppression. This is to show that although Orked is able to defend her actions and to confidently exit the schoolyard after hurling a football into Izwan's stomach to end their altercation, she is still the victim of Malay male psychological projection (Gledhill, 1988, p. 80).

One of the obvious features of the film's depiction of Orked is her physical appearance. Her introduction is conveyed initially through the sound of her voice reciting verses from the Quran which is followed by her appearance in a white prayer costume. Although Orked is portrayed as modest yet open-minded throughout the narrative, this initial image nevertheless cements her identity as a young Muslim woman. More importantly, the film weaves in the religious factor at the onset of the narrative in order to establish the problematic nature of Orked's ensuing relationship with Jason who is a non-Muslim. At the same time, the significance of Orked's outer appearance is made even more interesting by the image of her in a sarong, firmly affixed about her chest to preserve her modesty<sup>75</sup>. Through this image, the film also emphasises Orked's Malay cultural identity in that this attire invokes the imagery of the *kampung* and create a more sensual representation of traditional Malay femininity and ethnicity before the arrival of urban modernisation and Western influences, and before the era of Islamic revivalism.

Figure 5a



The most noticeable feature of Orked's outward appearance throughout the film is her *baju kurung* (see figure 5a). While the *baju kurung* can be considered a sign of the Malay woman's conformity to cultural values, it can also be argued that in the context of this film, the image of Orked in a *baju kurung* is an indication of her non-conformity to her immediate social milieu. Instead of the Western-style attire worn by her peers, Orked disregards the norm of appearing outwardly neutral and non-racial by wearing the traditional costume of the Malay

<sup>75</sup> This manner of tying the sarong is called *berkemban* by Malays.

woman. This makes her stand out in her immediate setting, and at the same time, functions as a vital part of the *mise en scène* as it appears to demonstrate Orked's unspoken confidence in her Malay-Muslim identity for the most part of the film. It is a consistent signifier of her ethnicity, a reminder to Jason that she is 'the other'.

Yet the film utilises Orked as the representative of interracial tolerance. As illustrated in the discussion of *Gubra* and *Muallaf*, the underlying message in Yasmin's films is an ideal and hopeful invitation to embrace differences and to flourish in a diverse Malaysian society. This is again conveyed when Orked agrees to meet Keong in a traditional Chinese restaurant<sup>76</sup> – something that Muslims in Malaysia would not normally countenance. By going to the restaurant and making an effort with Keong, Orked negotiates her position as a young Malay-Muslim woman and demonstrates the 'process of give and take' (Gledhill, 1988, p. 67) that indicates her genuine attempt to take interest in Jason's (Malaysian-Chinese) world. This is further illustrated when Orked responds to Keong's friendly remark of 'not all Chinamen are crooks and not all Malays are lazy' with an amusing rejoinder 'ah, but Malays *are* lazy', in an effort to put the two young Chinese men on a more level playing field and feel more at ease with her. The manner in which Orked interacts with the Chinese characters, therefore, is the film's way of further augmenting the interracial theme. For the meeting with Orked has made Keong think not only about 'Malay girls in wet sarong' but also reflect on aspects of life and culture that the Malay and Chinese communities might have in common, when he says 'it's not that I dislike them (Malays). It's just that I never really thought about them. But now I do, because of Orked'. Thus, through her independent actions, the heroine has negotiated the realignment of racial ideals that bridges apparent cultural divides which are confronted by Malaysians every day.

The portrayal of the heroine, in relation to the interracial theme, is also achieved through the depiction of the family. The atmosphere portrayed in Orked's home, for instance, parallels the depiction in classic Hollywood and Malay family melodramas of a bourgeois domestic sphere that is generally dominated by women. Apart from the focus on Orked, various female domestic activities such as grooming, cooking, and female conversation on day-to-day issues take up a large part of the narrative. Scenes depicting Orked's household reveal the warmth and affection that each member of her family, Yam included, display for one another. Regular conversation among the characters here is usually jovial, often laced with humour and spoken in gentle tones. Her parents are also portrayed as loving and attentive, and

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<sup>76</sup> A conventional Chinese restaurant or stall in Malaysia does not serve *halal* meat. Muslims would only be able to obtain *halal* Chinese cuisine in highly rated hotels or restaurants that specify this detail (Eckhardt, 2009).

enjoy healthy marital relations. The film suggests that Orked's upbringing and particularly the support of her mother is the primary influence of Orked's mindset, which allows for her assertiveness in thought and action – for instance Orked's mother's appreciates Hong Kong soaps and the family uses both English and Malay with ease. Orked's humanistic and liberal leanings are also depicted in the respect and affection she has for Yam, the live-in housekeeper, who is regarded and treated by her parents as a member of the family.

The film, nevertheless, presents an interesting cultural facet that illustrates the patriarchal chain of command even though a strong female presence exists within the family. Despite the closeness portrayed between Orked and her father, it is her mother who tells her father about the relationship with Jason – betraying a hierarchy in the family dynamic that is still headed by the father. In the scene which shows the women in the family all clad in sarong and sitting in a row on the staircase, Orked's father joins in the women's activity. In what appears to be a comic moment, he sits on the bottom step, in front of the women, and hands Orked a comb to brush his bald head. The effect of this is two fold. On the surface it can be perceived as the action of a loving father who, acknowledging their anguish<sup>77</sup>, seeks to be at one with his womenfolk and lighten the mood. Likewise, it could also be interpreted as an unconscious effort on his part to pierce what appears to be a closed community of female connection and shared emotions – the action of a man who seeks to illustrate his masculine authority by taking his place on the first step, his womenfolk lined up behind him. The narrative also reveals that Orked and Jason's relationship is openly discussed within her family only after the father is informed of the matter. In this way, the film reveals the cultural as well as the gender dynamics in the communication process with the older generation as opposed to a more direct form of communication with members of both sexes from the same age group. This is depicted in various scenes involving the younger generation – a common feature of melodrama. Orked's father is also depicted as asserting his role as the patriarchal leader in terms of spirituality, as indicated in the scene where he asks why the women in his household have not said their afternoon prayers. The film, thus, uses such instances to ultimately indicate that such patriarchal assertion of authority is constantly undermined by the women within the Malay family structure.

Through a clever layering of narrative shifts between Orked's and Jason's families, the film not only further enhances the interracial motif but also provides an insight into familial aspects that form the character traits of the two main protagonists. In contrast to the

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<sup>77</sup> Orked is about to leave for university in England.

harmonious atmosphere in Orked's household, for instance, the film shows a lack of intimacy between Jason's parents. The portrayal of Jason's kind and receptive mother is sharply contrasted to that of his cantankerous, chauvinistic father and their cold yet volatile relationship serves only to highlight the loving intimacy enjoyed by Orked's parents. The lack of warmth in Jason's family is further illustrated in the detached atmosphere of the family dinner scene and the ensuing outburst when the Singaporean daughter-in-law ignores her restless child. The effect of the Chinese patriarch's chauvinism is also made evident in the portrayal of his sons who have chosen non-traditional paths away which also appear to illustrate his impotence in the family home. Jason's older brother has gone elsewhere, in this case to Singapore, to seek his fortune as roots in Malaysia appear not to be deep enough to anchor him, while Jason, the video-seller, has assumed a Western name<sup>78</sup>, in itself seen as very Hong Kong-style but has also become embroiled with the local triad master. The distance between Jason's family members is presented when Orked phones his house and is informed that there is no one by the name of Jason there. The film also hints at another racial stereotype when Orked is told that she has telephoned a Chinese house, reinforcing not only the assumption that she has made a mistake, but also suggesting that it is highly unlikely for Malays to be calling a Chinese house, this one at least.

In addition, the film clearly illustrates the influence of the maternal figure in the identity construction of both the heroine and hero. Orked's comfortable acceptance of Jason and the Chinese culture, for example, is explained through the portrayal of the female influences in her life – her mother and housekeeper Yam. Throughout the film, Orked's mother is portrayed as gently steering the events in her household. Malay society would naturally expect her to adhere to the traditional roles of an obedient wife, and a mother who acts as guardian of her daughter's virtue and moral well-being<sup>79</sup>. Orked's mother is not portrayed as the clichéd, over-dramatic parent when she finds out her barely legal teenage daughter is associating with a young man of a different race and, more importantly to Malays, of a different faith. Instead, the film presents an enlightened character who is able to accommodate Eastern and Western influences and values. In this way, the film's representation of the heroine is also a mirror of the mother who is open-minded, yet ultimately never forgets her ethnicity or forsakes her values for others. Yam is also portrayed as assuming a surrogate maternal role in

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<sup>78</sup> He makes the name up in the spur of the moment to introduce himself to Orked.

<sup>79</sup> The stereotypical model of the maternal figure is usually depicted as the nurturing, moral guide who has the responsibility of creating happy, fulfilled and well-adjusted individuals in the family (Kaplan, 1987, p. 126). The film's portrayal of Orked's mother fits this description, and Orked's persona further justifies this notion.

Orked's household, somewhat like the mammy figure in *Imitation of Life* (Sirk, 1956), but is also a confidante and advice-giver to both Orked and her mother. This is evident, for instance, when Orked's mother informs her husband that Orked has told Yam about Jason – 'telling Yam is her way of telling me without telling me' – clearly suggesting the mutual understanding between them, and the mother's approval of Yam as mediator between Orked and herself. Although she is technically a housekeeper, the value that Orked and her mother place on Yam is notably presented through the staircase scene in which she sits at the top, above Orked's mother, suggesting that Yam also provides maternal comfort to the biological mother in Orked's household.

The bond between Orked and her mother is also portrayed in the mother's protective approach to Orked's relationship with Jason, as illustrated in the bedroom scene which sees Orked's mother gently enlightening her husband about the existence of Jason in Orked's life. Orked is thus not portrayed throughout the film as having to negotiate her romantic liaison with the patriarchal authority of her father because it is her mother who is portrayed to do the negotiating. The father's disapproval of her relationship with Jason, highlighted only in the concluding scenes of the film, is dealt with by Orked's mother who reminds her husband of how in their younger days her own father had initially disapproved of him, stating he too was '*tak sesuai* (unsuitable)'. The film, thus, further illustrates that despite the father's relaxed attitude towards the women under his roof, his disapproval of Orked's relationship means that Orked can only confide in and seek comfort from the protective sphere of her mother and Yam, the maternal figures who have negotiated the familial issues pertaining to her relationship with Jason<sup>80</sup>. The bond between the female characters in Orked's household is definitively illustrated in the stairway scene (see figure 5b). The emotive quality of this scene is enhanced by the absence of speech and by the use of sentimental background music, to emphasise that the women in Orked's family have come together to embrace and support Orked in her time of sadness.

Figure 5b



<sup>80</sup> It can thus be argued that, to some degree, the film's portrayal of Orked's mother parallels Kaplan's idea that mothers who are 'closely bonded positively' (1987, p. 126) with their daughters tend to identify their own desires with what is right for the daughter.

The long shot used takes in the entire staircase and appropriately captures the image of the women sitting in a row, simultaneously brushing each other's hair, in the frame. This image is particularly significant because it reflects the female and the maternal relationship; depicting the bond between the women and the comforting and supportive maternal realm that truly accepts and shields Orked from the harsh realities and antipathy of the outside world.

Like the effect that Orked's mother and Yam have on Orked, the portrayal of Jason's mother in turn allows the film to account for his inclination towards a different culture and his attraction to Orked. In the patriarchal atmosphere of Jason's home, the mother-son relationship is not repressed but instead appears to be the only congenial and soothing element in his domestic sphere. The portrayal of Jason's mother to an extent parallels the maternal figures in classic Malay films, in Indian cinema, as well as classic Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s and 40s. She is generally depicted as nurturing, but is also self-abnegating, and yields to the selfish demands of her husband. She is portrayed as typically caring and loving towards her son, as illustrated in her affectionate and cheerful manner with him, but displays a frustrated and gloomy disposition when having to deal with her chauvinistic and ill-tempered husband. The mother's ethnicity, nevertheless, helps to explain Jason's interest in Malays and their culture. Her use of the Malay language and dress (indicating her *Peranakan* background<sup>81</sup>), her penchant for old P. Ramlee movies and songs, and Jason's own appreciation of *ghazal*<sup>82</sup> is significant as it offers an array of narrative elements that establishes the interracial motif within the film as well as facets of Jason's character. The notion of interracial empathy and affinity, for instance, is strongly suggested when Jason's mother, upon learning that the poem Jason recites was not written by a Chinese, comments that this is 'Strange. A different culture. A different language. And yet we can feel what was in his heart'. The profound nature of her statement, at the beginning of the film, prefigures the love story within the film, and also points to the film's optimistic motto concerning race relations.

The film's illustration of the love theme clearly positions Orked as the romantic heroine. The love motif is initially suggested in the introduction to the young lovers which is presented in a similar way – respectively through the sound of their voices, each uttering a

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<sup>81</sup> A term used for descendants of early Chinese immigrants to the Malay Archipelago. They partially adopted Malay customs (food and dress) in an effort to be assimilated into the local communities and spoke a dialect of the Malay language which contains many Hokkien words, while retaining some Chinese traditions (religion, name and ethnic identity) (Lim, 2003).

<sup>82</sup> Traditional Malay music heavily influenced by Hindi and Persian rhythms.

*Figure 5c*

different language, to highlight their racial difference and more significantly, to prefigure their eventual liaison. Romance is first established through the main characters' vision, when they first set eyes on each other at the market, in the manner of 'love at first sight' (see figure 5c), to suggest that time momentarily stood still for them.

The reference to 'eyes' is significant as the problems faced by the heroine in the fulfilment of her love pertain to the issues attached to Jason's 'sepet' eyes. The music used for the most part of the narrative also enhances the 'emotionality' (Nowell-Smith, 1987, p. 73) of scenes depicting the time Orked spends with Jason. The Cantonese pop song accompanying the opening credits and sentimental background music are repeated at various points which shows them together. The use of the Cantonese song is significant, for instance, when Orked and Jason visit a retro-style Chinese photo studio, as the song functions as the 'signifier' (Doane, 1987, p. 109) of the couple's love and 'formulates [the] mood' (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 50) of young love and excitement relating to the couple. The repetition of the song also appears to indicate that their love is 'unique and unrepeatable' (Doane, 1987, p.109). In this scene, snapshots of the couple in various poses, like newlyweds recording a moment for posterity, adds to the romantic effect already engendered by the song. The photographs also appear like mini tableaux that chronicle their love and determination to be together.

The romantic effect is further presented through the wide-angled frames of the couple in different settings. One particular image, for instance, features them sitting at a bus stop, sheltering from heavy downpour while another shows them sitting at the end of a pier overlooking a lake, deep in conversation. The film also creates an emotional and nostalgic tone through the repetition of black-and-white flashback shots of the couple as primary school children (materialised in *Mukhsin*), the poignancy enhanced by sentimental background music and the suggestion that Orked and Jason have crossed paths without realising it in the past. Through the spellbound look on the young Jason's face, the scene offers the romantic notion that Jason has perhaps loved Orked from a very young age, enhancing the element of fate and destiny that is common in Malay cinema. This emotional pattern is further intensified when the

camera focuses on Orked's face in Johari's car window, as she ignores Jason's attempts to explain his complex predicament. The repeated image is again a black-and-white flashback of Jason's view of Orked as a little Malay schoolgirl looking at him with a blank expression on her face. Here the film sets up the forthcoming heart-break at the end as the car, and Orked's face, moves away and Jason sees her disappear from view, marking the last time that the couple see each other.

The portrayal of the heroine as a woman in love, however, does not seem to include an overt illustration of female desire. Orked is repulsed by Johari's attempt to kiss her and physically fights him off, while Jason's attempt turns out to be an awkward moment between them. Despite the portrayal of Orked's feisty nature, the film thus illustrates a more innocent and virginal representation of the heroine, further enhanced by her traditional costume and in contrast to Maggie, the triad master's sister, who naturally expects Jason to spend the night with her. Orked's somewhat idealistic perception of her relationship with Jason is further illustrated when she learns of Jason's predicament involving Maggie. The emotional charge created via Orked's facial expressions reflects her inner turmoil, not just over what she perceives is a betrayal of her feelings, but also her heartbreak at the thought that the preservation of her virginity (and suppression of her female desires) has not been reciprocated by Jason who has made Maggie pregnant. The broken-hearted Orked is also seen, from this point onwards, in melancholic moments devoid of dialogue, up till the concluding scenes. The romantic heroine's pain is articulated in the form of verbal suppression and through mournful physical and facial expressions.

*Figure 5d*



The love motif reaches its pinnacle with the film's ending. The film heightens the tense expectation of the couple's reunion by layering the scene with clips of Orked in the family car, in a state of confusion over her feelings for Jason, and clips of Jason on his motorbike speeding in order to get to the airport. This anticipation is crushed when Jason is killed precisely at the same time as Orked, still en route to the airport, decides to telephone him. A happy ending for the couple, therefore, appears to be unattainable or at least highly improbable. This is the part in the film in which the narrative seems at its most melodramatic as Orked, whether by force of



will, imagination, or fantasy manages to reach Jason and appears to be holding a conversation with him, at the point when he has actually died (see figure 5d). At the same time, the narrative revelation of Jason's death and Orked's lack of awareness of the accident evokes an overwhelming sense of pathos, enhanced by the close-up of Orked's tearful verbal farewell, and the sound of Jason's tender and reassuring verbal responses. The film, in this instance, offers the excess element in the form of the implausible twist in the narrative that clearly exceeds the limits of what is normally considered realistic. But for melodramas, in cases where a pleasant narrative outcome proves to be unlikely, 'the eruption of excesses in the film text prove to be impossible to contain [and] the artistic license' (Mercer and Shingler, 2004, p. 14) involved in the usage of excess has to be accepted. On a romantic level, the excess element here may be perceived by some as signifying love that transcends the boundaries of race and religion, and even endures beyond the grave, as indicated by Orked's apparent ability to communicate with Jason. Jason's death is certainly a piece of melodrama that marks the death of the interracial love affair. It can be argued that Jason's death not only signifies the end of young love for the heroine but can also be perceived as a convenient way to dispose of a romantic diversion in order to allow Orked to embark on the next phase of her story. Ultimately, the emotional denouement in *Sepet* is not just to make it merely a story of unfulfilled love. Perhaps Orked's final conversation with Jason can be viewed as the portrayal of her psyche preparing itself for the next chapter and giving the romantic heroine the perfect ending of saying goodbye to Jason who tells her that he will wait for her return. The film's ending, although heartbreaking for the love story and for the romantic heroine who is caught up in a train of events which she cannot control, is however, a satisfactory conclusion for Orked as the resolute, independent woman who survives and moves on with her life (as illustrated in *Gubra*).

Analysis of the film is by no means complete without commenting on the film's possible suggestion of a multi-racial utopian ideal in its portrayal of the social experiment that is Malaysia, with its three main races living together in supposed harmony. Although it can be argued that the film is suggesting an image of Malaysia seen through rose-tinted spectacles, the portrayal of Orked, her family, Jason and his mother – who see beyond ethnicity and religion into the persona that lies beneath – is ultimately what the film seeks to promote and celebrate. The exploration of race, ethnicity or interracial relationships might not be new in the Western tradition. This film, however, especially at the time of its release, was a groundbreaking piece of entertainment in Malaysia because the narrative challenges established norms, commencing with the title itself – *Sepet*.

### ***Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2004)**

Set in the Sultanate of Melaka (Malacca) in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, *Puteri Gunung Ledang*<sup>83</sup> is unlike the other films selected for analysis as it revolves around two famous legendary Malay figures, the warrior Hang Tuah and Puteri Gunung Ledang (the Princess of Mount Ledang). *Puteri Gunung Ledang* is set in feudal Malay times amidst the founding of kingdoms and dynastic warfare in which history, mythology and fiction are fused to recount a fateful tale of forbidden love at a time when allegiance and honour to one's ruler and one's land take precedence over personal desires. The depiction of the heroine in this film represents Malay women in feudal times, in a manner that is akin to films in Malay cinema of the 1950s-1970s. The following discussion focuses on how *Puteri Gunung Ledang* offers a selection of melodramatic aspects in its portrayal of the Princess as a romantic heroine, in the projection of the love motif, and its depiction of the practices and beliefs that form the *mise en scène* illustrating a feudal patriarchal society. More specifically, I examine the main conflict illustrating the struggles of the heroine and how she negotiates politics, male authority and true love.

The female characters in this film live in a world controlled by patriarchal structures and are seen as having to serve the purposes of patriarchal institutions in the form of family, ruler and hence, society. The film illustrates the woman's position by drawing on the notion of masculinity embodied in the male characters and juxtaposes it against the inferior circumstances of the female characters in the narrative. As illustrated in the narrative, women function in the traditional capacity of bearing and raising heirs, or performing other duties determined by the male figures in their lives. The young woman in the village scene, for example, is used as a bargaining chip by her father as she is promised to a local loan shark – her predicament is an example of the commodity-like status of women in ancient times. Scenes set in the Sultan's royal court feature women who assume the roles of servants and whose duties are to carry out traditional domestic chores. There is also the all female dance troupe whose role is to provide entertainment for the Sultan, his courtiers and any diplomatic (male) visitors via songs and courtly dance routines. Other women in the palace are the *dayang* (ladies-in-waiting) who are expected to assist the Sultan's consort with her daily rituals and to accompany her on outings and formal events. As the consort, Teja's role is merely to perform

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<sup>83</sup> The narrative of the film is adapted from one of the most famous legends recorded in *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals). Such period adaptations were a popular genre in the Malay cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, with an earlier version of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* produced in 1961.

her wifely duties to the Sultan and maternal responsibilities to his sole heir. Bayan, who performs the duties of the chief lady-in-waiting for Gusti Putri, also appears to function in a maternal capacity until her services are made redundant. Gusti Putri's role and duties as a princess and her involvement in the intricacies of expanding and contracting empires and alliances are also predetermined by the set norms of her society which in turn are strictly imposed by her brother as ruler of Majapahit. Gusti Putri's efforts to make her own choices results in much conflict and her fate is ultimately decided by yet another male figure, the Sultan of Melaka. As will be further explored in this discussion, the women in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, as wife, mother, or sister, are unmistakably portrayed as expressions of the male psyche.

The film demonstrates that the idea of Malay masculinity is such an intrinsic part of the society that for male characters to feel threatened by a woman seems equivalent to them having been emasculated. The male sovereigns represent a vital illustration of this point, as demonstrated by Gusti Adipati and Sultan Mahmud in their dealings with Gusti Putri. The film also demonstrates this crucial aspect of male authority in the concept of divine kingship<sup>84</sup>. This is depicted through the portrayal of Sultan Mahmud's pompous ego, such as when he places his curse upon Gusti Putri, and when he reminds the court of his divine role in response to her comments on the presumptuous nature of his marriage proposal. Gusti Adipati's politically-based decisions also exemplify the norms of the male defined societies in the narrative. His negotiations with the kingdom of Melaka, for instance, although incompatible with his sister's aspirations and political in nature, illustrate his perception of what it means to protect his status and, therefore, his kingdom. Prince Benowo, in turn, demonstrates his masculinity by extending his power over other lands in the Malay Archipelago, to the extent of destroying neighbouring kingdoms, unless his demands are met<sup>85</sup>. Through the actions of the male rulers the film thus portrays the power of patriarchal authority. The depiction of male control, therefore, highlights the absence of the influence of women who exist alongside men, not just in the establishment of a dynastic lineage, as in the court of Majapahit, but also in the dynamics of the family unit, as portrayed in the royal household of Melaka. This illustration of patriarchal control enhances the portrayal of the female characters, like the Sultan's consort for

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<sup>84</sup> The Malays of the time, whose ancestors would have worshipped Hindu Gods, believed in the divine nature of kingship (Shome, 2002, p. 34).

<sup>85</sup> There was some controversy in local Malaysian media over the film's portrayal of Prince Benowo as a merciless Islamic leader. For the purpose of this film analysis, the portrayal of Benowo as an aggressive conquering ruler of feudal times, serves as a fitting illustration of relentless male ego.

instance, as typically subordinate – visible in the private domain but having very little say about courtly (political) or family matters.

The portrayal of Hang Tuah, however, contrasts with the image of the strict patriarchs discussed above, and this enables his character to function as the love interest of the heroine. The film shapes his character in the manner of the Malay warrior, and, in this way, Tuah represents both the romantic as well as the feudal hero. As a romantic hero, Tuah's initial portrayal appears to be an ideal match for the heroine. He is introduced into the narrative as a protector of women when he stops the moneylender's thugs from taking the young woman away from her father, and lectures the crowd on the twin values of respect and kindness towards women. Tuah is, for the most part, portrayed as a formidable hero with firm principles, a strong, handsome demeanour and a sound knowledge and skill in *silat*<sup>86</sup>. The film also presents instances that refer to his legendary *keris* (Malay dagger) called Taming Sari, as if to indicate a phallic assertion of his Malay masculine identity. Tuah's portrayal as a dutiful feudal hero, however, complicates his role as a romantic hero. The film portrays his indefatigable conviction of duty as a problem in the plot which adds to the conflict faced by the heroine, and further contributes to the unlikely fulfilment of their relationship and love, as clearly defined by Gusti Putri when she says with an air of resignation, '*Tuah tetap Tuah*' (Tuah will always be Tuah). Tuah keeps his love and desire for the princess hidden because of his implicit loyalty to the Sultan. The portrayal of his internal misery and conflict at being torn between his heart's desire and loyalty to his ruler is presented in an almost Shakespearean-like manner – full of dilemma and emotional frustration. The film aptly juxtaposes Tuah's turmoil against the emotional suffering of the Princess, illustrating the aspects of desire and muteness (Modleski, 1992) in melodrama that relates to unfulfilled expectations in a love story.

The emotional tone in the narrative is first established through the close relationship between Gusti Putri and Bayan whose portrayal as a loyal servant extends to that of a surrogate mother – indicated by the physical mannerisms she adopts around Gusti Putri and the advice she provides. Bayan's portrayal clearly corresponds with that of the nurturing yet self-abnegating maternal figure, particularly when she supports Gusti Putri's decision to go to Melaka and aids her flight from Majapahit. By supporting Gusti Putri's decision, Bayan is instrumental in initiating the conflict that ensues, and this leads to her tragic end. As Bayan's actions of helping the Princess are dismissed as treason by the King and his male adviser, she

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<sup>86</sup> *Silat* is essentially the combative art of fighting and survival in the Malay social culture and tradition, and is often associated with spiritual strength which translates into physical power.

realises that she is no longer useful to Gusti Putri and shows the ultimate denial of self by committing suicide. By presenting this gesture, the film turns Bayan into a tragic figure and the victim of patriarchal mercilessness. The element of maternal sacrifice is illustrated through her monologue which suggests that she is in psychic communication with Gusti Putri, as the scene briefly reverts to that showing the princess (in Melaka) whose despondent facial expressions and mournful singing betray her telepathic knowledge of Bayan's predicament. The melodramatic moment is presented when Bayan plunges a dagger into her abdomen, marking quite significantly the connection to her womb and thus ending her maternal role, but reflecting the 'more heroic and subversive aspects of Mothering' (Kaplan, 1987, p.125). The film enhances the emotional effect of this scene by layering it with shots of the princess acutely aware of Bayan's plight and the precise moment in which she ends her life. The pain and sorrow of both characters heightens the melodrama in this part of the story through the interlacing of scenes indicating what appears to be their telepathic way of bidding farewell and reinforced in the frame showing the Princess clinging to Bayan's shawl (see figure 6a).

Figure 6a



As *Puteri Gunung Ledang* is effectively a love story, the film illustrates the emotional connection between the lovers through both narrative and non-narrative means and promptly establishes the existence of love before the obstacles to the fulfilment of that love is presented in the body of the film (Doane, 1987, p.114). This is established in the early parts of the film when Gusti Putri decides to travel to Melaka in order to fulfil her promise to Tuah: 'If you do not come for me, then I will go to you'. An intimation of Gusti Putri's independent persona and desire is given when she performs a welcome dance to the royal entourage visiting from Melaka and captures Tuah's attention by skilfully scattering a spray of fragrant flower petals upon him while at the same time making it appear an incidental part of the performance. This prefigures the portrayal of her ensuing actions and her assertive nature. Gusti Putri's role as a romantic heroine is also defined when she declares, 'I have decided to follow my heart' in her telepathic conversation with Gusti Adipati. Her brother's response of 'since when does the Princess of Java have the right to follow her heart' however encapsulates the woman's role in a

feudal Malay society. The suppression of the woman's personal desire in exchange for duty is further enhanced through Gusti Adipati's remark, 'We all have dreams. But we have our responsibilities too'.

Much of the love and attraction expressed by Gusti Putri for Tuah is also conveyed through physical gesture, such as the *pas de deux* in their first private meeting (see figure 6b). The intensity of their attraction for each other is particularly heightened by the absence of dialogue and through eye contact, exemplifying Doane's idea of the love story revealed by way of the character's vision. The Princess demonstrates her attraction through traditional Javanese

Figure 6b



dance movements<sup>87</sup> that are feminine yet sensual, whilst maintaining eye contact with Tuah, hence indicating evidence of female desire that further contributes to the love motif. The sensual atmosphere created by the *mise en scène* and the element of eye-contact is again evident when the lovers meet on Mount Ledang. The constant circling of the camera creates a dizzying effect that represents their vision and rush of emotions to project the cinematic pleasure of a lover's reunion. Further evidence of love and female desire are communicated at various points in the film through objects and gestures that melodramatically represent Gusti Putri's emotional turmoil. Her first appearance in the film, for instance, shows the Princess finding her way to the middle of a maze made of white chiffon curtains, only to find a tree that has been set on fire, as if to represent her blazing passion. The image of a lovelorn heroine pining for her man is also evident when she stands on the beach gazing into the far distance towards Melaka (and Tuah) and utters the statement that introduces the love motif in the story, 'When the time is right we will be together'. The portrayal of the heroine's solitary emotional suffering is even more obvious in scenes on Mount Ledang which feature the princess spending much of her time yearning for Tuah, as though willing him to come to her, and signifying the act of waiting that Doane attributes to the woman in love (1987, p. 109). The melodramatic mode is apparent in the portrayal of Gusti Putri's emotional state, through the focus on her forlorn facial expression and movements, enhanced by melancholic background

<sup>87</sup> Such dance gestures, which originate from the Hindu tradition, are filled with nuance and denotation. The context for the practice of dance is of great social and religious importance (Brakel-Papenhuijzen, 1995, p. 7)

music and the sound of her own singing which, though in Javanese, suggests extreme longing and pain, evident in the tone and timbre of her voice.

The film's depiction of the romantic heroine is also achieved through flashback scenes of Gusti Putri's happy and intimate moments with Tuah. The physical and emotional connection between the two characters is again portrayed through the romantic outdoor setting in which the lovers are horse-riding and playfully racing against each other. Once again, their attraction for each other is illustrated through an exchange of blissful and loving glances. The sensual subtext suggested in the romantic dance shared in their first meeting is further developed when the Princess clasps the *Taming Sari*. Gusti Putri's action of holding up and admiring the suggestively phallic-shaped sheath appears to be the film's way of depicting her desire for Tuah's masculinity. The orchestral score utilised in the scenes involving the lovers, both when they are featured together and when they are apart pining for each other, also contributes to the love motif in the film as it repeatedly signals the couple's desire. The combination of visuals and music in such instances further intensifies the portrayal of Gusti Putri as a romantic heroine who is strong and determined, enhanced by the image of her 'waiting' for Tuah's arrival.

In addition to the romantic fervour of the heroine, Gusti Putri's character also contrasts to the image of women's dependency on male support and protection in the film. This is reflected in the level of autonomy that her character demonstrates as when she fends for herself in the jungles of Mount Ledang, for instance, albeit through her magical powers. In this way, the film creates an image of a power shift for the heroine, as the princess does not depend on her brother for protection. Instead it is Gusti Adipati who depends on his sister in order to save his kingdom and his position as ruler of Majapahit. His action of arranging her marriage is purely political and for the protection of his status. As her brother (family), he is not protecting her from an unfulfilled life and shows no regard for her personal choice. This notion of power reversal is enhanced when Gusti Putri sets the seemingly unattainable feats as a diplomatic means of providing an avenue for the Sultan to retract his marriage proposal. Although conducted in a somewhat circuitous fashion, her action still exemplifies the film's portrayal of a strong independent heroine placed in a position that allows her to negotiate conflicts and dilemmas.

More significantly, Gusti Putri's behaviour of acting completely against cultural norms, let alone royal protocol, ultimately leads to her downfall. When the princess makes a magical appearance before the Sultan and his courtiers her appearance and her subsequent attempt to rationalise with the Sultan run in opposition to expected courtly etiquette. Despite her royal

status, Gusti Putri is still perceived by the (patriarchal) court as inferior, by virtue of her gender, but her candour before the Sultan illustrates that she does not succumb to patriarchal expectations and decrees. Her attempt to openly rationalise with the Sultan over the politics of his actions suggests that she presumes to be an equal of men. The heroine's assertive actions has not resulted in her possessing any real control, for her manner of rejecting the Sultan's proposal meant that she is intruding into the political arena dominated by men in which she has no influential authority. The moment in which the Sultan vengefully and egotistically casts his royal curse illustrates the film's final testament of patriarchal rule and power over the woman. The banishment of the princess represents the rejection and punishment of the woman's independence and assertiveness. The Sultan's final decree, therefore, signifies the ultimate repression, not just of the female voice but also of the woman's life.

In true vintage Malay cinematic fashion, reminiscent of the film adaptations of legends and folklore popular between the 1950s-1970s, the film also presents scenes of a mystical nature that may appear to suggest the element of excess that is another aspect of melodrama, but is very much a characteristic of such period Malay films. The mystical elements are generally used to indicate binary opposites of good and evil, or to function as the special qualities of characters that can play either a central or a minor role in the narrative. Mystical elements are also used as narrative tools that manoeuvre the story. Gusti Putri, for instance, is attributed with mystical abilities, as when she magically appears to her brother and has an intense telepathic communication with him, illustrated through clever use of facial expressions and voiceovers. Gusti Putri also has the ability to change her physical appearance and transform herself into an old hag<sup>88</sup> in order to investigate the intentions of Sultan Mahmud's emissaries camped on Mount Ledang. And to deter them from finding her (so as not to be presented with his official proposal of marriage) Gusti Putri summons the powers of nature and makes roots and plants come to life in order to scare them from the mountain. The most aesthetically striking scene depicting her mystical powers is when her seven pre-nuptial demands to the Sultan appear in the form of old Javanese script emblazoned on leaves that magically float from the sky, which renders the other male characters bedazzled and somewhat in awe of her powers. This effect is repeated when Gusti Putri magically appears in the court of Melaka surrounded by the same golden Javanese script. What is significant about these excessive elements is not just their contribution to the mystical *mise en scène* befitting the

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<sup>88</sup> The old hag character is known as *nenek kebayan*, a well-known disguise according to the legend of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* as well as other Malay folklore.



legend behind the story but also their role in further illustrating the resolve and power of the heroine.

*Figure 6c*



The melodramatic mode is again utilised in the film's emotional ending in which Tuah is running up Mount Ledang in the hope of reaching Gusti Putri before the Sultan's curse takes effect at dawn. The excessive emotional charge of the ending is conveyed through the sound of Gusti Putri's deep and profound sobbing reverberating across the mountain and Tuah's declaration that he is willing to vomit blood just for one last chance of setting eyes upon her. The film visualises their unfortunate circumstance in the moment when Gusti Putri's hand reaches out about to touch Tuah from behind, just as he turns, sensing her presence, only to find her not there (see figure 6c). In this way, the film illustrates the nature of what their life and relationship has been reduced to and creates the definitive image of unfulfilled love, so close but never to be consummated. What is also implied by the film's conclusion is that the heroine's actions are detrimental to her survival and emotional fulfilment; they result in a complete negation and suppression of her independence and present her as the ultimate melodramatic victim.

In the final analysis, the implication that has clearly emerged from the love story of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* is that despite their cunning the female characters cannot achieve complete autonomy. The feminine voice is still repressed and efforts by the women to assert what they believe to be right are actually to their detriment. It is evident from this film that for the Malay woman living in feudal times, cultural protocols were influenced by patriarchal ideals and these governed all vital parts of their public and private lives. Yet despite the fact that patriarchal structures have changed over time, the dilemma of the female characters depicted in this film can still, to some extent, parallel their modern counterparts as examined in the other selected films. It can be argued, nevertheless, that the film is only able to depict such a powerful romantic heroine as Gusti Putri by giving her space in a historical setting and giving her character an unhappy end.

### *Gol & Gincu (2005)*

*Gol & Gincu*<sup>89</sup> does not utilise various elements of melodrama in its depiction of the love theme and the heroine. The film's focus on female gender issues, however, makes the film a fitting illustration of how the independent female protagonist negotiates personal conflict, obstacles and suppression in her pursuit of love. The following discussion focuses on the feminist tone that the film advocates through the contrasting portrayals of Putri and Shasha, and through the depiction of patriarchal views on ideal female behaviour juxtaposed against the multifaceted representations of the independent young women in the film.

The portrayal of Putri and Shasha clearly corresponds with Gledhill's independent woman persona in terms of agency and resistance to patriarchal dominance. Putri, the heroine, exudes a rather 'girly' image in a friendly and enthusiastic manner that, in early parts of the film, proves to be humorous but conveys a sense of naivety in her character. Apart from her

*Figure 7a*



effusive and animated demeanour, the film projects Putri's ultra-feminine characteristics through elements such as her stylish but altogether impractical design for the Malaysian National Service uniform, and her predilection for pink and pastel shades of clothing and fashion accessories (figure 7a). Putri is also initially portrayed as the devoted girlfriend who is very much favoured by boyfriend Eddy's mother. She is the 'cheerleader' who faithfully champions Eddy's interest and involvement in futsal<sup>90</sup>, choosing to support him at matches instead of going to Paris with her mother, and even giving up her clothing allowance (regarded as a major sacrifice on Putri's part) in order to surprise him with tickets to a Real Madrid football match for his birthday. Putri's transformation commences when her romantic aspirations to one day become Eddy's wife are crushed by the insensitive manner in which he chooses to abruptly end their relationship. Putri's frustration and anguish at breaking-up with

<sup>89</sup> Discussion is only confined to narrative revelations in this film version and not the follow-up TV series.

<sup>90</sup> Futsal is an alternative version of football/soccer that is played on a smaller pitch and usually indoors. Its name is derived from Spanish (*fútbol de salón*) which means 'indoor football'.

Eddy and learning that he has quickly moved on into a relationship with Shasha is clearly depicted via one of the few melodramatic elements that the film utilises – the dream sequence in which an anxious Putri is confronted by her adversary Shasha who prevents her from scoring a goal and therefore from Eddy (see figure 7b).

*Figure 7b*



In contrast, Shasha is verbally incisive, physically robust and projects an intimidating disposition, particularly towards Putri, as depicted in their first meeting and futsal match. The film's feminist position is reflected in Shasha's portrayal as the self-assured 'striker' whose futsal skills and ability as captain of her team signifies female infiltration of male spaces – as defined by the pun in the team name 'Ballbusters'. Shasha's condescending attitude towards Putri, therefore, indicates her intolerance towards any perceived signs of weakness in members of her own sex that might threaten the status of women like her who have successfully gained entry, but not necessarily acceptance, into a male realm. She tells Zie: 'Because of girls like that [Putri] people don't take us seriously no matter how good we are', and she confronts Zie with the ultimatum of staying with or leaving Ballbusters when she is told that Zie has been coaching Putri's team. Shasha's domineering attitude is also portrayed in her relationship with Eddy, in which she dominates. Shasha's character is so over-assertive that she is unable to tolerate Eddy's fickle desire for a 'striker' as well as a 'cheerleader' girlfriend. Shasha equates his definition of support – providing water and towels at his futsal match – to being a 'servant'. The film's disapproval of Shasha's arrogance and derision of Putri, however, is illustrated through the compassion that Zie shows to Putri and her team, through Putri's attempt at improving her skills at futsal, and through the portrayal of Putri's character itself – as a loving daughter and as the caring, warm and thoughtful friend to Jijie, and team BTB. Shasha's character is nevertheless redeemed when she physically prevents Jijie's father Izam from hitting Putri, saying: 'If you want to hit someone, don't hit a woman, like a coward', and when she concedes defeat at the futsal tournament and attempts to make amends with Zie.

This development in Shasha's character demonstrates that the binary depiction of Putri and Shasha does not signify the archetypal good versus bad feature that is familiar to

mainstream Malay cinema. Instead, the film advocates a striker and cheerleader combination, also signified in the film's title *gol* (goal) denoting 'striker' and *gincu* (lipstick) referring to 'cheerleader'. This negates the traditional concept of the ideal Malay woman that is suggested through the attitude of J's mother Madam Fatimah who refers to futsal as a man's sport and whom J mimics, saying: 'If you are a woman, act like one. Stay at home, wear a sarong, learn to cook instead of running here and there, cutting your hair short and acting like a man'. For the most part of the film, Fatimah keeps regular tabs on tomboyish J who resorts to telling fibs about her whereabouts in order to be able to play futsal. The cheerleader-striker combination is evident when Fatimah discovers the error in her opinion at the carefully staged tea-party organised by Putri and Datin Aina and announces: 'I just thought that this game was only for tomboys. But now, after meeting all of you, I feel very relieved'; Fatimah later cheers on J at the Hotlink futsal tournament and ends up managing her daughter's futsal career.

Futsal itself is depicted as a significant counterpoint to the patriarchal notion of the ideal woman or 'cheerleader'. Futsal is employed as a narrative device that allows the film to demonstrate the agency of the female characters because Putri's conflict does not only revolve around her break-up with Eddy but also with futsal, when it is unclear whether some of her team-mates will be able to participate in the tournament. Although Putri recaptures Eddy's interest when she improves at futsal, the 'satisfaction' (as Zie describes it) from scoring a goal at a match becomes a crucial element in order for the heroine to fully attain the combined role of cheerleader and striker. This also allows the heroine to challenge the imposing patriarchal views linked to Eddy's character from the onset of the narrative. The film's standpoint on male superiority and control is exemplified through the egotistical manner in which Eddy carelessly ends his relationship with Putri. This has not been some brief fling but an accepted and established relationship. And when Putri tells him that she is taking a real interest in futsal he dismisses her as incapable of enduring the physical and mental requirement of the sport, pointing out 'you're not tough enough', only to change his mind and attempt to rekindle their romance when she displays her futsal skills and exudes self-assurance.

The film's reproach of male dominance is also evident in the portrayal of Sarah's boyfriend Fiq who publicly criticises her weight and coerces her into taking up the goalie position because of her size. He makes it seem as though his is the expert-male opinion, only to lash out at her when the team loses to 'Ballbusters' in a friendly match. The portrayal of Sarah and Fiq's relationship also highlights the complexities surrounding the issue of female body image. Sarah, another 'cheerleader', endures and accepts Fiq's sarcasm in order to hang on to their relationship even when she does not appear desirable to him. Sarah's involvement

with futsal, however, allows her to discover her physical strength and skills and exposes her to female support and camaraderie that builds her confidence and helps her to muster courage to terminate her demoralising relationship with Fiq.

*Figure 7c*



The film's censure of the male ego is also conveyed through Eddy's rationalisation of the polygamy practised by his father, stating that he was bored with Eddy's mother, and through the abuse committed by Jijie's father. The issue of incest, the film's injection of social commentary on a subject popular during the time *Gol & Gincu* was produced, also contributes to the portrayal of Putri's emotional growth<sup>91</sup>. When Izam's malevolent act is exposed Putri, as well as the other female characters, rally around Jijie and provide her with some much needed female support and comfort rather than judgement (see figure 7c). And when Jijie scores the final goal that renders BTB the tournament champions, Jijie and her team mates also become victorious over male disdain, neglect and suppression. The film's rejection of male subjugation is ultimately defined when Putri, who has reached the pinnacle of the futsal tournament, and who has fully transformed into Eddy's ideal striker-cheerleader woman, rebuffs his offer of a reconciliation.

*Figure 7d*



In contrast to Eddy and Fiq, Reza is portrayed as the worthy love interest whose gentlemanly and supportive attitude towards Putri is evident even before they establish a relationship. The note he secretly slips into her ankle and shin guard bag stating: 'You're good. Play for yourself, not for him' provides Putri with the personal encouragement and

<sup>91</sup> In an interview with Benjamin McKay (2007), Bernard Chauly states that the film wanted to highlight the fact that incest did not only take place in villages, and to provide a narrative 'jolt' to the heroine.

incentive that Eddy and Fiq fail to provide to Putri and Sarah respectively, and clearly points to the film's message on female emancipation. The narrative coincidence of Reza's helping to rush Jijie to the hospital augments his hero image and allows the heroine to move away from her plan to reclaim Eddy. This is enhanced in the scene which sees Putri venting her frustration on the futsal pitch only to find comfort and optimism from Reza (see figure 7d). And, unlike Eddy who quickly begins to chat up Becky after he is rejected by Putri, Reza chooses to place Putri's futsal interest first even though she has not responded to his invitation to travel to his hometown as his girlfriend.

Figure 7e



The female characters' involvement in futsal therefore conveys the film's interpretation of equality between the sexes (see figure 7e). Futsal becomes a channel for the female characters to assert their independence as well as retaliate against patriarchal oppression –male spectators jeer at Putri's first attempt at futsal stating that she would be better off playing *batu seremban* (five stones)<sup>92</sup>; Zie tells Putri that in her experience as a Penang state futsal player: 'we play our hearts out but it's only the men's team that people see'. Although Putri takes the initiative to play futsal in order to reconcile with Eddy, she empowers herself, and discovers valuable friendship and a new, more supportive love interest. Putri emerges from an insecure, 'allergic to exercise', 'princess' (literally 'putri') into the confident, resourceful and well-liked captain of 'Bukan Team Biasa' ('No Ordinary Team'). The team name and the members aptly signify the portrayal of a diverse range of female representation. J is the stocky tomboy who lies to her mother in order to play futsal; Aishah is the tall, plump defensive player who does not let the *hijab* prevent her from tackling the opposition in the tournament; Dayang, despite her feminine name (meaning lady-in-waiting) turns into an aggressive dynamo on the pitch, yet a nurturing, maternal figure to her siblings;

<sup>92</sup> *Batu seremban* or 'Five Stones' is a traditional Malay game involving two or more players. This game is more popular with girls. Five small triangular cloth bags filled with rice, sand or saga seeds are tossed into the air and the player has to pick the remaining on the ground in one clean sweep. The winner is the first player to complete the eight sets.

Ling, the tall, slim, feminine and highly motivated goalkeeper is one of the few non-Malays portrayed in the film; Sarah, Fiq's doormat of a girlfriend, is conscious of her weight but emerges as another one of the team's confident 'strikers'; Zie is the tomboyish futsal exponent, originally from Ballbusters, but who emerges as Putri's, and in the process BTB's, champion and cheerleader; and Mia, although not a futsal player, is very much a vital member of BTB who cheers from the sidelines, always confident, cheerful, and the ideal best friend. The film also bravely intensifies its diverse representation of women by presenting a suggestion of lesbianism in its depiction of the friendship between Zie and Shasha<sup>93</sup>. The feelings between them are faintly implied when Shasha, jealous of Zie's friendship with Putri, rants: 'How long have we been friends? And yet you don't know me at all'. The sentimental music-video montage towards the end layering moments of the various characters contemplating their feelings – Zie for Shasha and vice versa; Eddy for Putri; and Putri for Reza – allows the film to further hint at the lesbian aspect. The montage juxtaposes the scene in which Shasha compares a photo of her and Eddy with one of her and Zie, and the shot of Zie who thinks about Shasha and is thus oblivious to the conversation provided by her female dinner partner, against scenes in which the heterosexual characters think about their relationships, to augment the love theme.

Ultimately, *Gol & Gincu* is an illustration of the urban traits of young middle-class Malaysians in the Klang Valley embracing modernity, as reflected in the *mise en scène*, the blend of Malay and English dialogue, and the array of characters representing class distinctions and womanhood. More specifically, the film's depiction of how the female protagonists negotiate their way through changes and obstacles posed mainly by patriarchal structures illustrates the many facets of femininity and demonstrates its stance on female empowerment.

### ***Mukhsin (2007)***

*Mukhsin*, the final instalment in the Orked series completes the multidimensional portrait of Orked's journey from childhood to adolescence, and to marriage. The film goes back to a time when Orked is ten years old and experiences first love with 12 year-old Mukhsin. Yasmin Ahmad herself states that this film, which is inspired by Wislawa

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<sup>93</sup> The issue of lesbianism has not been significantly addressed in Malaysian cinema thus far. Nasir Jani's film *Rozana Cinta '87* (1987) appears to be an attempt at tackling this subject matter although the film ends with protagonists complying with patriarchal structures.

Szyborska's poem 'First Love'<sup>94</sup>, examines 'an interesting human condition' – how romantic love can jeopardise a beautiful friendship. In *Mukhsin*, Yasmin once again showcases a more tolerant version of Islam and its values through the heroine's home life and her loving family. Ostensibly, the film is not an outright melodrama but the melodramatic mode is still evident in generating the emotions felt by the main protagonists and therefore, in illustrating the love theme. And because she is portrayed in a pre-pubescent stage, Orked does not fully assume the role of a romantic heroine until the final parts of the film. In the following discussion, therefore, I examine the portrayal of Orked as a young independent heroine in relation to the film's depiction of first love by illustrating how the protagonists negotiate the tenuous dimensions of friendship turning into romance.

As in all the previous films on Orked, the heroine in this film is unconventional, feisty, and has a mind of her own. Orked is unlike her female peers in the village who prefer to play *masak-masak* (pretend cooking). Her tomboyish-ness and preference for more boisterous activities with the boys in the playground make it hard for her to be accepted by the girls in her neighbourhood. She hides under her bed when invited to role play a wedding scene and she only joins the girls when her father promises to take her to a football match. She reacts against injustice by confronting bullies at her school, who steal chocolate from what appears to be a younger boy, by throwing one of their schoolbags out the school bus window. And she physically attacks one of them when he hits Mukhsin with a wooden board when Mukhsin's back is turned. Orked is also able to confidently refute and is not disheartened by the spiteful chidings of Ayu the girl next door who constantly repeats her mother's condemnation of Orked's mother; and Orked does not engage in idle gossip when it is pointed out that Mukhsin's Aunt Senah used to be a cabaret dancer<sup>95</sup>.

Throughout the film, Orked fights to cross boundaries by demonstrating that she is capable of standing on the same patch of playground with boys her own age. Yet, as part of the *mise en scène*, the film displays a clear separation of the sexes in the playground which seems intentionally to suggest the norms of a Malay-Muslim society, and to further demonstrate Orked's non-conformity and her preference for male vigorous games over female tittle-tattle. Orked's tenacity and feistiness is also demonstrated when she first meets Mukhsin

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<sup>94</sup> The poet writes about how first love may not be as tempestuous or as passionate as later ones, but for some reason it's the one that stays with you until the very end.

<sup>95</sup> This profession is not considered as 'respectable' by traditional Malay society. In old Malay cinema, particularly in P. Ramlee films, '*perempuan kabaret*' or the 'cabaret woman' is normally portrayed as the black sheep of Malay society and associated with transgression.



– she does not display fear or hurt when he hurls a football at her but robustly throws it back at him projecting her confidence and ability to stand up for herself and join the boys in a game of *galah panjang*<sup>96</sup>. Their first meeting contrasts with the romantic ‘eye-contact’ moments of the lovers defined by Doane and identified in some of the other films discussed because the narrative positions this moment as the beginning of an innocent friendship. In this scene Orked is still in the *songkok* (hat worn by Malay men) she wore in the ‘wedding’ game, portraying a ‘masculine’ image of a strong heroine who is ready and able to contend with her male counterparts and signifying her ability to negotiate her status (see figure 8a).

Figure 8a



As in *Sepet*, the influence of the domestic realm on the construction of the heroine is evident in the form of Orked’s affectionate, non-conformist parents Inom and Atan. Orked’s parents are deemed as ‘Malays who have forgotten their roots’ by Rozi, their pregnant neighbour whose domestic life is far from blissful and whose own husband is seen wearing a cowboy hat. As this is not a component of traditional Malay dress it marks the film’s visual punch at those who nitpick about cultural precision<sup>97</sup>. As in *Gubra*, the film criticises the Malay male ego when it shows Rozi’s husband having clandestine meetings with a young Malaysian-Indian woman who is duped into thinking he is unmarried. This contrasts against Inom and Atan who joke with each other affectionately and who even enjoy showering together. Rozi’s husband does not show any warmth or provide any care or assistance to his heavily pregnant wife. Although Atan is the head of his household, and leads his womenfolk in family prayer, he regularly assists his wife with domestic duties. Rozi’s husband is also not seen interacting with Ayu, while Orked is always on family outings with her father who jokes

<sup>96</sup> *Galah panjang* is a traditional Malay outdoor game which requires two teams, consisting of ‘runners’ and ‘blockers’ to get control of each other’s designated area in the playground.

<sup>97</sup> Yasmin, in her blog, made references to certain individuals who were pedantic in their criticism of *Sepet* and *Gubra* on live television, questioning whether her films are ‘cultural polluters’ (*pencemar budaya*). This phrase is used in *Mukhsin*, perhaps in a comical way, to refer to Orked’s cat when it kills a neighbour’s chick.

with her and consoles her, for example when she is upset about Mukhsin's outburst in the playground.

The harmonious and jovial atmosphere of Orked's family is also illustrated through the composed and humorous manner in which they deal with the repossession of their sitting room sofa. The film is consistent in its contrasting portrayal of Orked's family, who do not criticise or harbour ill-feelings towards members of their community, unlike Rozi who takes delight in the sofa repossession and whose marriage and family is falling apart as her husband reveals his desire to marry another woman (presumably the Indian girl he has been dating). In *Rozi* the film presents a character who is a victim of Malay male repression and selfishness, who is embittered by the neglect she endures and who takes pleasure instead from prying into and passing judgement on her neighbour's affairs hoping to find that their misery exceeds hers. In contrast, the image of Orked and her free spirited mother dancing in the rain to 'Hujan' ('Rain')<sup>98</sup>, the song played by Atan and his *keroncong*<sup>99</sup> band, and sung by their housekeeper Yam, clearly illustrates their close-knit family dynamic. The image of the mother gyrating in a 1960s pop dance style, in the downpour and in transparent, wet clothing that emphasises the mother's figure, again points to a picture of a more moderate Muslim family

Figure 8b



(see figure 8b). The deep humanism that is projected through the depiction of Orked's family is also reflected when Yam makes Malaysian ice-cream and tells Senah that mixing flavours are acceptable and differences can be more favourable. This again describes the unconventional and tolerant characteristics of Orked's family, introduced at the onset of the film which shows Orked in a Chinese vernacular/primary school, conversing in Mandarin with her teacher who shows an interest in reading her stories – a multicultural facet of Yasmin's heroine that is established in *Sepet*, *Gubra* and *Muallaf*.

<sup>98</sup> This song is written by Yasmin Ahmad's father. Yasmin's parents appear after a dedication ('For my mother and my father') at the end of the film sequence – adding a biographical element to the inspiration behind the film and enhancing the importance Yasmin places on family relationships, as conveyed in her films.

<sup>99</sup> *Keroncong* music has existed in Malaysia for centuries but many believe that this music originates from Indonesia. The ukulele and viola are essential instruments in a *keroncong* ensemble.

Orked is also clearly shaped from the same mould as her mother who pretends to cane Orked while the family of the boy whose schoolbag Orked has flung out the bus window listens from the sitting room. In this comical scene the film highlights the common hypocrisy in Malay-Muslim society by juxtaposing the irony of Rozi's envious criticism of Inom's ability and inclination to speak English, presuming that she is ignoring her Javanese heritage, against the shock and regret expressed by the bully's mother over Orked's punishment, which essentially is a common practice of child discipline in traditional Malay society. The scene further illustrates how the closeness and trust between the heroine and her family shapes her self-confidence and character as, after the bully and his family leave, Orked and her family share a fit of uncontrollable laughter, not at their visitors but at their own elaborate antics. In this scene, Inom's open-mindedness is reflected when she speaks to Orked about menstruation and dispels the myth about how tampons terminate a girl's virginity – a popular notion amongst the ignorant in the Malay-Muslim population. Inom's comments are a narrative signal to mark the impending change to the heroine's persona as Orked's childhood phase is about to end when she enters her imminent biological rite of passage at the point when she has developed a close friendship with Mukhsin who has begun to possess romantic feelings for her.

The film also draws a distinction between the comfort and delight of Orked's home life and the turmoil in Mukhsin's family<sup>100</sup> to further enhance the value of family relationships and to illustrate Mukhsin's character. The depiction of Mukhsin justifies the use of his character's name in the title of the film because it alludes to the love motif and describes, in particular, the heroine's first love. Mukhsin is portrayed as a likeable character who is generally polite to those who are older but appears to be the one that the boys in the playground defer to, perhaps on account of his age. The narrative contrasts the way in which the two brothers deal with the absence of their mother. Hussein is bitter, confrontational, and thumps Mukhsin's injury instead of showing any brotherly concern or affection, as if jealous of the maternal-like attention Mukhsin is getting from Senah and Orked. Mukhsin, however, appears to be stoic yet the film reveals his vulnerability when he spends time with Orked's family. His strength and maturity is most clearly portrayed when he comforts Hussein upon learning of their mother's suicide. Although he receives attention and kindness from Aunt Senah, Mukhsin becomes attracted to Orked and her caring, easygoing family as they include him in their family-related activities. He accompanies Orked's family when they dispense

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<sup>100</sup> Mukhsin's mother has fled from his abusive father, and Mukhsin and his older brother Hussein are taking refuge with their Aunt Senah.

with the family cat; he is asked to sing along on the car-ride home; he is invited to have dinner with them; he and Orked have Quranic recitation classes with Yam; and he longingly watches Orked's parents slow-dance with Orked sandwiched in between. In this way, the film reveals how Mukhsin's unsettled home life and a young man's hormones provide his character with an emotional complexity that the young Orked and their growing friendship are unprepared to handle.

Figure 8c



The film does not, however, present Orked and Mukhsin's relationship as an obvious romantic structure. The romantic tone in the film is nevertheless illustrated through the warm setting and striking tapestry of the rural landscape. This is evident, for instance, in Mukhsin's dream sequence which shows him sitting with Orked against the most picturesque backdrop of *padi* fields, as if they are on a wedding dais like the playground children in the 'wedding' game. After Orked places the *songkok* on Mukhsin and demurely kisses his hand, the film injects a brief moment of magic realism as Mukhsin is elevated into the air (see figure 8c) – as if to indicate the level of his happiness before he wakes up to the news of his mother's death. The appearance of the actors who play the older Orked and Jason in *Sepet*, as a married couple who helps Mukhsin and the young Orked construct a kite, contributes to the notion of romantic fulfilment for Orked. This has already been introduced at the end of *Gubra* which sees Orked and Jason waking up together to her mother's phone call and is suggested again at the end of this film. The insertion of these constructed happy endings augments the emotional pattern of the 'Orked trilogy' and demonstrates the sentimental pleasure that is created in a space that only melodrama offers.

As in all of Yasmin's films, songs play a vital role in supplementing the tone of a particular scene. In this film, for instance, the mournful sound of Nina Simone's version of the French ballad '*Ne Me Quitte Pas*' ('Don't Leave Me') complements the personal longing illustrated in the image of Mukhsin standing outside Orked's house and watching her happy household and her parents dancing with Orked sandwiched in between (see figure 8c). The phonograph quality to the song creates a nostalgic tone and adds to the sentimentality of the

scene, even though the song also points to the worldly taste of Orked's family<sup>101</sup>. This song again contributes to the heart-rending atmosphere and pathos created near the film's end when Orked rushes to catch Mukhsin before he leaves the village but only manages to retrieve a T-shirt which he has left on a tree (presumably a souvenir). The fragile and indeterminate quality of Orked and Mukhsin's love story is defined at the heartbreaking moment in which she catches a glimpse of his hand stretched out the taxi window making the same rippling gesture as when he arrived at the beginning of the film – thus, intensifying the pathos, by operating multiple viewpoints [Orked's; Mukhsin's; the viewer], and making everyone a victim (Elsaesser, 1987).

In terms of the two main protagonists, the idea of love is conveyed through actions like fleeting looks, utterances and gestures that point to Mukhsin's budding feelings for Orked. Mukhsin repeats her name when they are sitting on a tree, as if about to express his feelings but lets the moment pass; he tentatively places his hand on hers in the car as if to comfort her from the sadness of abandoning her cat; and he sits on a tree in front of Orked's house gazing at a feminine appearance of Orked through a window, in a *baju kurung* and stroking her long, luxurious hair. Mukhsin's request that Orked maintains having long hair also indicates his (physical) attraction to her and is evidence of male possessive attitude, echoed when he is enraged by the sight of Orked wrestling with another boy during a game of *galah panjang*. Apart from spending time with Mukhsin and engaging in similar activities and like *galah panjang*, climbing trees, and cycling around the neighbourhood, Orked's 'liking' of Mukhsin, however, is conveyed through her attempt at beating up Hussein and the bully, and through her insistence at wearing an old T-shirt like Mukhsin's. The conflict for Orked is only portrayed when Mukhsin expels her from the playground in a jealous fury over her wrestling with another boy. Her naivety and obliviousness to his feelings, as well as the stubborn resolve of her independent character, is evident when she refuses to respond to any of his attempts at rekindling their friendship until his last day in the village when she discovers what he had written (perhaps an expression of his feelings) on a kite he made as a peace offering. This marks a brief transition period in the film before Orked's portrayal turns from young, independent heroine to that of a romantic heroine at the film's end.

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<sup>101</sup> This is another example of Yasmin's penchant for injecting a variety of music selection in her films, a small indication of her global worldview. Apart from using local songs Yasmin's choice range from the Cantonese pop song in *Sepet*, a Bollywood love theme at the beginning of *Gubra*, to several European classical pieces in *Muallaf*.

Figure 8d



The complete transformation of Orked into a romantic heroine in this film is marked by the voiceover at the end – the young adult Orked who narrates the outcome of the unfulfilled love story of Orked and Mukhsin. As the young Orked goes about her usual business at school there is a clear shot of a young Chinese boy standing by a pillar, whose gaze is following Orked (see figure 8d). This appears to be the very same boy featured in *Sepet* – a young Jason. The poignant quality that is attached to Orked's love story is made even more palpable when, at this moment, the voiceover speaks about her hope that Mukhsin finds his second chance just as she has. This serves as a reminder to audiences of the love story that, in terms of narrative sequence, ensues in *Sepet* but again suggests that Orked does indeed find ultimate happiness with Jason and not with her first or any other love (as depicted in *Gubra*'s final scene). In this way, the film's touching and mellow homage to first love is concluded with the notion of eternal love expressed by the voice of Orked, the romantic heroine, reciting the Rumi poem<sup>102</sup> on the notion of everlasting love.

### ***Cinta (2006) and Sepi (2007)***

In these films Khabir Bhatia presents multiple timeline love stories that bear the stylistic influence of Bollywood in terms of gliding camera technique and the use of pop love ballads, a technique that is also popular in many mainstream Malaysian films. These elements form part of the backdrop to scenes illustrating the development of relationships, the tearful moments and the happy endings of the various protagonists. The films focus on characters that come from a wide economic and social cross-section of Malay society. Because of the multi-narrative structure of both films and the emphasis on male protagonists in some of the stories, I can only attribute the idea of the romantic heroine to one protagonist in *Sepi* and

<sup>102</sup> The lines in the poems are as follows: 'The minute I heard my first love story/I started looking for you, not knowing/How blind I was. /Lovers don't finally meet somewhere, /they're in each other all along.' (Jallaludin Rumi)

three in *Cinta*. The female characters in these films are generally portrayed as independent personas and range from an elderly widow to successful professionals and a young college student. In the following discussion I examine the construction of heroines and other female characters, as well as the main male protagonists in relation to the love motif and consider whether these portrayals are accentuated by elements of melodrama. I also examine the injection of love story elements, namely the extensive use of love songs as a non-diegetic device, romantic *mise en scène*, last minute revelations and other methods of generating pathos and emotion.

*Cinta* (literally ‘love’) comprises five stories illustrating different dimensions of love<sup>103</sup> against the backdrop of the metropolitan skyline of Kuala Lumpur. Although each plot is different, the characters from each story are intertwined by the narrative coincidence of a character from one story knowing a character from another, and by the placement of characters from different stories into the same setting. In keeping with its theme, *Cinta* begins and ends with a montage of images depicting love in which an old Chinese couple is enjoying breakfast; a blind Malay couple – street musicians – is playing the accordion; and a pregnant woman is caressing her tummy at the beginning and is proudly holding her baby at the end. This montage is accompanied by a cheerful pop song and a female voiceover speaking of the film’s message on how sacrifice and loyalty leads to the eternal bond of love.

Figure 9a



The first story in *Cinta* illustrates the theme of love from the perspective of the older generation in the story of Rubiah and Cikgu Elyas. Rubiah is portrayed as an independent woman who displays the acumen to utilise her culinary skills and run a relatively successful food business. Any delineation of her as a victim (of a failed marriage<sup>104</sup>) is only briefly inserted into a part of her dialogue to illustrate her experience and wisdom. Rubiah is one of the more sympathetic female characters on account of the focus on her glistening eyes, kind facial expressions, gestures, and dialogue which illustrate her concern over Elyas’s behaviour

<sup>103</sup> Reminiscent of ‘Love Actually’ (Curtis, 2003).

<sup>104</sup> Rubiah’s husband leaves her for another woman after 30 years of matrimony.



and, more significantly, which emphasise the heart-rending circumstance of Elyas's illness. Rubiah is also given one of the more memorable lines of the film which directly conveys its love theme: 'Spending one day with someone you love, no matter how difficult life gets, is more meaningful than a lifetime with someone you don't love'. The portrayal of Elyas's gentle, wise and personable character explains the attraction and the protective feelings that Rubiah develops for him. In his sound mind, Elyas is depicted as an attractive elderly love interest who helps translate her menu into English, fixes the sign above her restaurant, and displays an admirable regard for the virtues and sacrifices of a life partner as when he says: 'a wife is not a possession, but a gift', reminding Rubiah of what was missing in her marriage and igniting her attraction for widower Elyas. This allows the narrative to progress onto her eventual decision of taking the responsibility of permanently caring for Elyas. Rubiah's decision is also the film's injection of humanity illustrated in the self- sacrifice and almost maternal-like care that she has chosen to give to him (see figure 9a).

Arianna's portrayal as a romantic heroine, however, is more tangible. She is portrayed as an independent young woman who displays the tenacity to venture into the unknown realm

*Figure 9b*



of a cosmopolitan city in search of Khalif, the 'love of her life' who has made her pregnant. Although she becomes the victim of the heartless nature of a big city when her bag is snatched, Arianna is resourceful enough to place a newspaper ad in an attempt to locate Khalif and displays a positive attitude in her hope of tracking him down. She even gets a job at Rubiah's eatery so as not to rely solely on Taufik's kindness for food and accommodation, as she tells him: 'if there is a will, there's a way'. And yet Arianna, blinded by her belief in Khalif, becomes the victim of male ill-treatment when she discovers that he has been dating a female colleague. However, through the portrayal of Taufik's feelings for Arianna, suggested in the way he looks at her, the quiet, sensitive manner in which he conceals his feelings (that only the audience is aware of) and his efforts to remain objective in helping her, the film minimises the misery of her circumstances. Although it seems as though Arianna's predicament is intensified through scenes of her patiently waiting for news on Khalif, her



fainting spell, her torment when she sees Khalif intimate with his female colleague, and her miscarriage, it is Taufik who negotiates obstacles for her. This allows the film to illustrate the development of their love story enhanced through the sentimental love songs, through their dialogue on finding true love, and through placing them in narrative situations that indicate Taufik's increasing attraction towards her. These developments in the narrative conveniently lead up to the disclosure that Khalif's interest in reconciliation was down to Taufik's efforts, thus reinforcing Taufik's character as the more desirable love interest. The portrayal of Taufik's kindness and growing feelings for Arianna, even when she is pregnant with Khalif's child, is another illustration of his selflessness and makes him a desirable protagonist in this love story (see figure 9b).

*Figure 9c*



Harris's tale, however, seems more of a sentimental love story depicted through moments of tearful and emotional revelations for him. The film invokes sympathy and sentiment for Harris in a number of emotive ways. Firstly, he is presented as an attractive and successful architect who is a loving husband and caring father coming to terms with his wife's infidelity and absence while negotiating his paternal duties and work commitments. The film does not, however, present any significant developments in his wife Airin's character through either the depiction of her dilemmas or in portraying her as a 'bad', unfaithful wife. Instead the brief moments of anguish that Airin displays when revealing her decision to leave Harris only further contributes to the film's way of emphasising his gloomy situation. Her confession is presented at the point when he is about to surprise her with his sketch of their dream home poignantly titled 'Our Symbol of Love'. The scene heightens his shock and dejection through the shot-reverse-shot between Harris and his wife, and a crane-shot of him standing in the rain at the building site that would have been their dream home, with a momentary focus on the ink running from the sketch that he holds. The misery of Harris's situation is emphasised through Airin's voiceover reading out the letter she wrote to Harris expressing her love for him as a friend and brother but not as a lover. Airin's character also functions as a narrative tool to generate a sentimental nostalgic tone as she is seen leafing through the sketches that

chart the stages of Harris's continuous love up to the point of the disintegration of their marriage. Harris's melancholy is also enhanced through the portrayal of their daughter's concern for him, her teary moments, and her eventual role in his recovery through the heart-shaped note left for Airin stating: 'because a little girl taught me love means letting go' (see figure 9c).

*Figure 9d*



Azura, the female protagonist in Azlan's story is yet another example of the film's independent-minded female protagonist who takes pride in her job and has strong opinions about Azlan's magazines. However, her character is rather one dimensional and merely functions as Azlan's love interest and her seemingly short-lived crisis is depicted only when she discovers that Azlan has reservations about publicly acknowledging his relationship with her in the press conference scene. Their story appears to be more of a romantic comedy, as illustrated in the music montages in which they are seen talking about ideas for his magazine, and in the depiction of his romantic gestures exemplified by their dinner date in which Azlan goes to elaborate measures to impress Azura with a mini orchestra playing her favourite ballad (see figure 9d). The rom-com aspect is enhanced by the comical scene of Azlan's public marriage proposal to Azura on a train, complete with applause from the extras in the scene and the local paparazzo's failure to capture a photo of them.

*Figure 9e*



Although Dian's story is about sibling love, the film injects a melodramatic tone by portraying her character as a tragic figure. Dian is, at the outset, the professional, modern and independent woman whose goal is to have a successful career. Yet she is also the 'other'

woman in an affair with a married man, portrayed in the image of her constantly waiting for her lover to phone or arrive at a restaurant, until she realises that, like his wife, she too has been lied to. She is the stalwart colleague and friend of Harris who stands in for him at a meeting when he is too upset about his wife's infidelity and comforts him in his time of sadness. More significantly, she is portrayed as the maternal-like older sister of Dhani who wants him to forge a settled and successful career as an artist rather than draw caricatures for tourists (see figure 9e). Although the film does not delve into the moral dilemmas of Dian as 'the other woman', the lead up to the emotional climax of this story begins with Dian's crisis over Dhani's obstinate decision to remain a street artist. Dian's frustration, as well as the film's description of yet another facet of love, is echoed by Rubiah who tells her: 'sometimes the ones we love most are the most difficult to love'. The tragic element in the story culminates when Dian dies after donating her kidney to Dhani as an act of love and self-sacrifice. This almost maternal-like aspect of Dian's character is introduced in the flashback scene of them as children taking refuge under the bed during a thunderstorm when Dian promises to always protect Dhani. The film intensifies the emotional tone to the story in the solemn funeral scene, when Dian's voiceover reads out the letter she has left to Dhani. This augments the heartbreaking quality of her death, which represents her act of self-sacrifice. Like the dialogue that is given to Rubiah, Dian's farewell letter to Dhani is used to underscore the film's celebration of love: 'we are often unwavering in our pursuit of all that is uncertain that we forget to celebrate the one thing in life that promises happiness – love'.

*Sepi* contains three stories that revolve around the theme of romance, loneliness and the search for a kindred spirit. The main protagonists are inadvertently linked by a single dramatic moment – a car accident – from which each narrative unfolds. *Sepi* also showcases the use of cinematography, lengthy music montages and a mixture of romantic elements such as 'looks' between protagonists, the element of fate or God's will (*takdir*), and tearful scenes to establish the sentimental tone of the love stories of Adam, Sufi and Imaan. The literal meaning of the film's title itself denotes the notion of loneliness, illustrated in the experiences of the main protagonist.



Figure 9f

Adam the chef, for instance, is portrayed as a comical yet likeable character who has been unlucky in love (see figure 9f). The film illustrates Adam's loneliness and longing for a romantic companion through his jovial behaviour at weddings, his jokes about his single status, and his comment to Ilyana: 'why do we meet, only to be parted?' Adam's situation is summarised in the leaflet 'Are you looking for someone special?' left on his windscreen. The leaflet later functions as a coincidental device that connects the main protagonists when it flutters into the air out of Adam's hand and lands on Sufi's windscreen, blocking his view and causing him to hit Imaan. The two main female protagonists in Adam's story are generally portrayed as independent women – the eccentric Suzy who has always held a torch for him, and Ilyana whose family has arranged her forthcoming marriage. Suzy is brassy and embarrassingly expressive in public. Although she is more of a comic character, Suzy is tenacious and goes all out to entice Adam. Despite her vociferous nature, Suzy's character is given a moment of distinction in the film when she slaps Adam at the point when he breaks off his engagement to her. Ilyana's portrayal, however, seems quite one dimensional and she only really functions as Adam's love interest. The film injects the romantic element to their meeting through their initial suspended eye contact and through the camellias in Ilyana's hair which capture Adam's sense of smell, an object that is repeated later in his story to remind him of Ilyana and enhance his sadness. Ilyana's brief dilemma, of having developed feelings for Adam at the point when her wedding approaches, is however not fully explored by the film. Like the romance between Azlan and Azura in *Cinta*, Adam and Ilyana's romance is depicted in more of a romantic comedy style as seen in the montage of her sampling his culinary creations and in their playful tryst in his kitchen. Her appearance at the wedding of Adam's sister only functions to provide a hopeful change for Adam's storyline and to set the narrative in motion towards its happy ending for Adam and Ilyana.



Figure 9g

Imaan, however, is portrayed fully as a romantic heroine, as well as a melodramatic figure particularly when her grief-stricken mental state is revealed. Imaan's loneliness is depicted through her morose and downtrodden demeanour and her involvement in the staging

of her poem poignantly entitled ‘sepi’ (loneliness). Her conflict is conveyed through the juxtaposition of her interaction with Ian and her imagined conversations with dead boyfriend Khalil. Khalil’s visual appearance in the story allows the film to build up the climactic effect of the accident and the truth about his manifestation in Imaan’s mind. The unexpected twist in Imaan’s story is presented in a melodramatic fashion as the film unveils the truth about Khalil through flashback moments as she lies in coma. Her flashback – a repetition of earlier scenes of Imaan, sans Khalil – is the point in which the film injects the melodramatic charge to her story before the dénouement of her recovery and happy ending with Ian (see figure 9g).

Sufi’s story is more of a tear-jerker in the film. His loneliness and grief are portrayed through his unkempt appearance, and through flashback moments reflecting memories of his dead wife. This is enhanced through scenes of him jogging which Marya questions as ‘running towards something or away from something’, and especially through the scene of a tearful exchange with his son Ashraf. These scenes are all accompanied by the film’s moving theme song, also entitled ‘Sepi’, in the background. Sufi’s melancholic portrayal allows the film to generate sympathy for his circumstance and to create a sense of frustration at the futility of his relationship with Marya (see figure 9h). In spite of his selfish efforts to persuade



*Figure 9h*

Marya to leave her husband especially given her inability to conceive, he is portrayed as a loving father, a creative entrepreneur, and a gentleman when dealing with Marya’s husband. Pathos and pity for the protagonists are further enhanced through Marya’s husband who is portrayed as a sympathetic character – he is gentle and sincere, makes an honest living, tries to help a friend harrassed by local thugs, and is not embittered by their inability to have children. The portrayal of his character allows the film to generate a general sense of joy when he learns of Marya’s pregnancy. At the same time, the film augments Sufi’s admirable characteristics when he helps her husband out by paying off the thugs and accepts Marya’s decision to remain with her husband given her pregnancy. Marya is portrayed as a virtuous woman who inadvertently falls in love with Sufi but complies with societal norms and does

not engage in a full-on affair with him. Marya's internal conflict is more obviously demonstrated through her dilemma over her loyalty to her husband, her yearning for a child, and her feelings for Sufi, as she tells him: 'we meet only to be parted'. The film defines her morality and goodness through her choice of the maternal role over that of a lover, which at the same time enhances the heartbreak for Sufi who remains true to his love for her till his death. The film augments the sadness of their love story through scenes of their respective voices expressing their feelings in letters. The emotional fervour of this story is again emphasised at the end through the image of a tearful Marya, the use of a moving ballad, and the appearance of a grown up Ashraf who looks exactly like his father (played by the same actor who portrayed Sufi) to inform her of Sufi's death and devotion to her, and the repeated use of the hair-tie as an object that marks Sufi and Marya's first meeting, all to reinforce the tragic unfulfilled reunion of Sufi and Marya.

In keeping with the love motif, *Sepi* presents in the end credits a dedication quoting a line from Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet': 'Yesterday is but today's memory, tomorrow is today's dream' as if to describe the sentimental reminiscences of unattainable love as well as the optimism of accomplished romantic unions projected in the film. The conclusion of the stories in both *Cinta* and *Sepi* are a combination of mainly happy endings that generate the pleasure of wish fulfilment. The tragic denouement in the stories of Dian and Dhani, and Sufi and Marya, however, project a sense of unfulfilled love by means of emotive, tearful scenes that are inspired by the Malay melodramatic traditions and that appeal to the mainstream audience.

What is ultimately significant about the main female protagonists discussed in this chapter are the shared and distinguishing features of their depiction as the romantic heroine. Doane states that the central action in love stories lies in the process of decision making by the heroine but this choice does not control the narrative route (1987, p.106). The portrayal of the female protagonists in the films discussed correspond with this idea only in the sense that, as independent personas, their 'decisions' reflect the female perspective. All the films, however, illustrate that the decisions of the female characters affect the narrative development and the outcome for the woman. Most of the main female protagonists such as Orked, Gusti Putri, as well as Putri and Shasha are complex heroines who clearly share non-conforming characteristics and are self-assured in their struggle against patriarchal structures. These heroines, as well as the female characters in both *Cinta* and *Sepi*, are representations of women at the mercy of patriarchal conventions who openly confront and negotiate repressive or unjust social circumstances by negotiating the emotional and social dilemmas connected to the fact

that they are women in love. The films discussed in this chapter demonstrate the obviously overlapping categories of female melodrama and the woman's film in terms of resistance, sacrifice, impossible love, and the maternal aspect, that is hypothesised in feminist film criticism, to reflect that the world of the romantic heroine is one of emotions and not action.



## Chapter 6

### TRANSGRESSION AND MELODRAMA: DEFIANT DAMSELS AND SENSUAL SIRENS

The issue of sexuality in Malaysia is coloured by religious, political and economic tensions. Instead of Western materialism and sexual liberation, the promotion of Islam, supported by the Muslim majority Malaysian state since the mid-1970s, provided many urban Malays with an alternative indigenous cultural identity. This offered a fundamentalist agenda to disaffected Malay youths to forge an identity as Muslim men. The Islamic fundamental philosophy that has since been promoted reclassified and controlled interactions between Malay men and women with regards to modesty, decorum and respect for limitations involving the body. Public appearance and the expression of sexuality amongst Malay women were influenced by a rise in adherence to ‘rules’ on dress and dealings between the sexes. Consequently, despite rapid modernisation in Malaysia, discussion of matters pertaining to sex has been relatively constrained. At the same time, however, there was growth of live sex shows in inner-city areas, and although women were arrested for prostitution, other types of commercial sexual services slipped beneath the radar (Manderson and Jolly, 1997).

To a large extent, contemporary Malay cinema does not appear to reflect conservative religious tenets despite the all-encompassing influence of the Islamic resurgence on Malay society. Malay films, particularly from the 1980s onwards, appear to acknowledge the commercial significance of sexual nuances on the big screen and this is apparent in the occasional lack of censorship *vis-a-vis* scenes of a suggested sexual nature (Khoo, 2006, p. 114), some of which are evident in the films discussed here. What this possibly reflects is the growing influence of secularism, a by-product of the rapid modernisation in Malaysia. Certain aspects of Malay custom, such as seeking advice from other married family members on matters pertaining to sex and sexuality, or discussing sexual potency and charms with traditional healers (as depicted in *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Black Widow-Wajah Ayu*) also show that Malay society, though still patriarchal, is more accepting of matters of a sexual nature than one might expect or anticipate in what is strictly speaking an Islamic society. Malay films, nevertheless, generally avoid controversy by not showing scenes where a female



character experiences sexual pleasure. If such a scene is indeed featured, as the films in this chapter prove, it usually involves 'immoral' female characters.

Aihwa Ong (1995, p. 163) observes that Malay society is 'an example of a Muslim society that permitted relatively egalitarian relations between the sexes ... compared, say, with the rigid gender segregation found in Bangladesh'. Ong also argues that gender equality extends to sexual relations because Malay custom assumes that 'husbands and wives will satisfy each other sexually whereas Islam stresses the husband's sexual needs over the wife's' (1995, p. 189n17). This, in general, is a reflection of the Arabisation of Malay society through the implementation of strict separation between male public roles and female domestic ones, due to the realisation that male rationality (*akal*) and female desire (*nafsu*) 'went way beyond any arrangement found in indigenous village arrangements where *akal* and *nafsu* are found in both women and men' (1995, p. 177). This clearly suggests that sexuality is not repressed in Malay custom but instead recognises female sexual pleasure, as demonstrated by the practice by Malay women living in villages of using 'different techniques and tonics (*jamu*) to condition their bodies for enhancing erotic pleasure' (1995, p. 188n5), a practice that is also practised by modern women living in urban areas regardless of their level of education.

My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate how certain Malay films convey the issue of sexuality and transgression in the portrayal of the female protagonist in the manner of Gledhill's independent heroine persona. As described in the methodology, my analysis does not take on a psychoanalytical perspective. Instead I focus on the *mise en scène* utilised in the projection of female sexuality, the depiction of patriarchal perceptions of the immoral woman, the exploitation of women, and the portrayal of female desire. In my discussion thus far, female desire is presented in the way that does not compromise the image of virginal purity, as evident in the portrayal of the heroines of *Sepet* and *Puteri Gunung Ledang* for instance. The films discussed in this chapter, however, link female desire to the portrayal of the woman who transgresses and circumvents the prescribed norms of society, in the manner of the fallen woman that has been described in the conceptual framework in Chapter Three.

In general, film-making in Muslim nations steers clear of overt portrayals of sexuality. Unlike the abstract imagery of love and sex in Iranian cinema, for instance, a few memorable Malaysian-Malay films present coarse depictions of sexuality and its awful consequences. I have selected Shuhaimi Baba's *Ringgit Kasorrga* particularly because the film utilises the element of doubling, a common feature of melodrama juxtaposing the immoral woman against a stereotype of the virtuous Malay heroine. From its very onset, *Ringgit Kasorrga* highlights the cynical exploitation of young women and their naïve dreams of glamour,

wealth and stardom. The film depicts the corruption and decadence – traits frowned upon by traditional Malay culture – arising from a readiness of the male to exploit youthful female dreams for personal gratification. In addition, I have also chosen to discuss three films by U-Wei Hj Shaari<sup>105</sup> to examine how the films portray the sexual figure who challenges patriarchal structures. *Perempuan, Isteri dan...*, *Black Widow-Wajah Ayu*, and *Buai Laju-Laju* prove to be significant texts for the theme of this chapter because the portrayal of the heroine as a sexual figure is distinctly unlike the heroines of mainstream Malay cinema who are normally depicted as virtuous women, as exemplified by the portrayals of many of the heroines discussed in the previous two chapters. I have also chosen *Jalang*, a film which received attention for its risqué title and scenes, as an example of how the fate of the fallen woman is depicted via melodramatic tropes. My analysis of the heroines in these films focuses on how the female protagonists' sexuality impacts on the cultural milieu depicted in the narrative and how character depiction and *mise en scène* denies any possible sympathy or ambivalence in the film's treatment of the heroine. The construction of femininity and the portrayal of the transgressive woman who must be punished for her misdemeanours functions as a powerful tool to undermine any idea of feminine agency.

### ***Ringgit Kasorrga (1994)***

The issue of female sexuality is established right from the very beginning of *Ringgit Kasorrga* and is subsequently re-established through several visual references to the female body and through narrative development. The images of female sexuality created in this way contribute to the film's portrayal of the exploitation of women, and the treatment of women as sexual objects, as clearly illustrated through the activities at Kasorrga. The film draws attention to the female figure in the party scene at Kasorrga, as conveyed through Meera<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> The late 1990s witnessed a handful of directors who made art house films with encouraging results. U-Wei Haji Shaari's *Kaki Bakar (The Arsonist)*, based on William Faulkner's short story *Barn Burning*, became the first Malaysian film to participate at the Cannes Film Festival. This film, which was initially shot on video for television, was rejected by local television. However, when it screened in New York in 1996, *The New York Times* called it: 'a fluid and beautiful film that captures the essence of Faulkner's story'. U-Wei has directed acclaimed films such as *Jogho (The Champion)*, 1999 and *Buai Laju-Laju (Swing My Swing High, My Darling)*, 2004. It is *Perempuan, Isteri dan...*, however, that has made U-Wei a household name. Having courted controversy over its title (originally *Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang*, which literally translates to *Woman, Wife and Whore*), the film nonetheless went on to receive five awards at the 11th Malaysian Film Festival including for Best Film, Best Director and Best Screenplay. Although U-Wei insists that he makes films primarily for local consumption, the support of local audience for his films has not been overwhelming. His films are noted for their challenging subject matter and perhaps may contribute to the unpopularity of his films in Malaysia. What U-Wei illustrates through his films is based on his perceptions on social lives and human beliefs.

<sup>106</sup> Meera's character is not from an ethnic Malay background, as indicated by her Portuguese surname, Almeida. Despite her non-Malay identity, it is essential to examine the portrayal of her character as it is significantly highlighted in the plot as a depiction of female sexuality in the film. Therefore, I must stress that although the character of Nina is portrayed as the

and the Blaze models, and shows the frivolous nature of their lifestyle. The sexuality of these women is enhanced through their heavy make-up, style of dress, elaborate hairstyles, and flirtatious behaviour with male guests during their modelling showcases. The camera focuses on their figures as the young women, clad in black, figure-hugging dresses are featured walking down steps and circulating among the various guests in a stylised ‘catwalk-like’ manner. Their curvaceous feminine shapes are further accentuated through the various poses they strike and in the exaggerated movement of their hips as if to suggest that the scene is filmed from a male perspective. The models also run their hands up and down their bodies, as if caressing themselves, in the process drawing attention not only to the jewellery that they are modelling, but also their figures. At the same time, the models are seen making eye contact with guests, adopting alluring expressions which suggest that jewels alone are not the sole items of value on offer. By virtue of their dress and bold gestures, the film presents an image of the models as a representation of superficial glamour and fleeting male desire, which would be wildly at odds with Malay-Muslim culture.

In the didactic manner of melodrama, the film illustrates its message on the exploitation of women in the portrayal of the Blaze models as objects of male sexual gratification and desire. This is demonstrated when businessmen who are guests at Kasorrga are seen flicking through the portfolios of models while at the same time scrutinising the women’s physical attributes via a two-way full-length mirror separating their room from the models’ dressing room. The idea of exploitation is enhanced because the models are not aware of their dual roles of beautiful clotheshorse and sexual plaything; they have been deceived into thinking that their assignment on Kasorrga is an opportunity for them to display their acting attributes and told that they would only have to be flirtatious and charming with certain male guests in order to secure a screen test. The scene instantly evokes the stereotypical image that already exists in Malaysia of the young Asian woman, euphemistically called GROs (guest relations officers)<sup>107</sup>, who are all too ready to loosen moral ties that bind them to their culture when confronted by the prospect of being seen accompanying and entertaining rich local and foreign businessmen. By virtue of their actions

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heroine, in the manner of the virtuous Malay woman (comparable to Mastura in *Selubung* and Orked in *Sepet*), the focus of discussion in terms of the sexuality motif is primarily applicable to the depiction of Meera and some of the Blaze models with Nina’s portrayal functioning as a contrasting character.

<sup>107</sup> The ‘Guest Relations Officer’ is a young woman working in a club or bars to keep male customers company and receives monetary rewards from such activities. Most GROs fall under the auspices of the ‘Madam’ (inferred from TVSmith, 2003).

and choice of lifestyle, such young women are seen by large sections of Malay society as a representation of both immorality and self-indulgence.

The portrayal of the models is also clearly juxtaposed against the virtuous Nina. The film illustrates Nina's independent persona as being partly a result of her moral and emotional support system, in the form of her family. The models, on the other hand, are portrayed as lacking such familial encouragement and, as the narrative reveals, it is left to Nina to stand up for their well-being and remonstrate against their exploitation. What is significant about this point, in relation to the motif of exploitation, is that although men are traditionally and generally accepted as being protectors of women and their honour<sup>108</sup>, the models at Blaze are instead used and exploited by men who would never countenance such treatment of their own womenfolk, as demonstrated by the character of Datuk Shah and his associates. The film's brave attempt at exposing the trade in female flesh for men's sexual gratification is apparent in the bedroom scenes which portray the models engaged in sexual acts with some of the businessmen<sup>109</sup>. *Ringgit Kasorrga* negotiates this cultural complication by pushing the barriers and showing naked male torsos, the models in sexy lingerie, as well as close-ups of lustful facial expressions in various frames. More importantly, however, some of the shots capture the fear and apprehension on some of the girls' faces suggesting that they have become involved in far more than they had bargained for and which further enhances the motif of exploitation.

The depiction of women as sexual commodities is also evident when Nina is offered remuneration for a tryst with a guest by the bodyguards at Kasorrga who declare that she would 'in her lifetime, never be able to earn that kind of cash all at once, while doing a regular job'. This motif is further enhanced in another reference to the female form presented through the lecherous Datuk Shah's comments about Nina's body when she meets him to discuss financial backing for her project. The film highlights the squalid male perception of women as sex objects when he candidly refers to the fair, smooth and supple quality of Nina's complexion and inquires about her bra size, blatantly stating his preference for a larger cup size, before openly propositioning a shocked Nina to adjourn to a hotel room. The film also illustrates the exploitation of women by demonstrating how the models are tricked or bullied into servicing men for money, through the portrayal of Syam, who is ready to arrange sexual

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<sup>108</sup> 'Discourses originating in the Muslim world promoted the idea of women's sexuality as valued commodity in need of overt protection by father, brothers, later husbands and sons, and by the state' (Graham Davies, 2005, p. 393).

<sup>109</sup> While Western films might include in such scenes varying degrees of male and female nudity, Malay cinema bans images of the naked form and sexual acts, suggested or otherwise.

services in return for financial gain. This is evident when he acts as pimp and organises rendezvous for some of the models in return for a percentage of what they receive in return. The exploitative ruthlessness of his character enhances the film's depiction of women as a sexual commodity because although he is privy (as Blaze hair and make-up artist) to the models' innermost thoughts and fears, Syam is, nevertheless, still ready to take advantage of the women when there is the prospect of financial reward.

The film also offers a different perspective on sexuality when Datuk Shah visits a *bomoh* (traditional healer) in order to, given his age, have his virility maximised. The *bomoh*, however, advises him to be sure that the procedure and medicine given should not be used to cause ill to others (i.e. should be used within the marital confines). Although Datuk Shah's penchant for women is highlighted, the film uses the *bomoh* to illustrate that while matters of a sexual nature are discussed and accepted in Malay society, this is mainly in the context of a marital relationship, the family being 'the only legitimate arena for the fulfilment of sexual needs' (Harvey, 1980, p. 24). The advice given by the *bomoh* also seems to be the film's way of presenting the issue of sexuality in a more favourable light in the midst of the negative implications suggested in the plot involving Blaze and Kasorrga.

Figure 10a



The collective portrayal of the Blaze models exemplifies modern Malay women seeking to assert their social and financial autonomy. At the same time, the film suggests that while modernity has enabled these young Malay women to pursue their personal career choices it has also led them to lose their moral compass and led them down a path of moral degradation. The film illustrates this by adding a sordid flavour to the activities at Kasorrga by revealing that the sexual acts between the models and the businessmen are videotaped (see figure 10a), through the scene in which Datuk Shah's henchman is laughing and clearly enjoying the role of voyeur as he watches proceedings in the bedrooms via hidden cameras, amused at the prospect of the tapes being used perhaps for the purposes of blackmail. The voyeuristic element is also evident when these men are seen in a surveillance room with a number of CCTV screens allowing them access even to the ladies' washroom. This serves to further augment the exploitative nature of relations between the male characters and the

models. Although the Blaze girls are willing participants at the party, the men not only have social and physical power, but an almost omniscient and omnipresent authority over them given their authority over and access to the CCTV footage and knowledge of what the film contains. The models, therefore, are not completely ‘independent’ because the male characters ‘bear towards [them] an intense and ambiguous staring gaze’ (Gledhill, 1980, p. 121). Seen or unseen, Datuk Shah and his cohorts have access to and knowledge of the women’s most intimate business and behaviour, and thus have control over them.

Kasorrnga represents an idealised masculine playground where cultural norms and morals can be left behind in the major urban centres. In relation to this, the film’s illustration of decadent proceedings at Kasorrnga plays a vital role in helping to suggest the fine line that exists between the apparently glamorous world of modelling and what happens when some of those involved allow themselves to be seduced by the prospect of fleeting monetary rewards. Some of this is exemplified in the scene showing the women, who are mainly escorts, grabbing items of jewellery being offered as presents by an Arab prince, thus depicting a stark image of material profligacy. More significantly, the female characters are dressed in immodest Western fashions and the guests are consuming alcohol in excess, and flirting with members of the opposite sex. The film, thus, depicts that the characters’ indulgence in immoderation and unrestrained behaviour is incompatible with traditional Malay values and custom. Kasorrnga is, therefore, an essential part of the *mise en scène* that introduces the motif of greed, material gain and overindulgence, which are connected to the women from Blaze who capitalise on their physical appearance and become models, but are instead instructed by Meera to entertain as well as sexually gratify the male guests on Kasorrnga. The extent of the debauchery on Kasorrnga is further implied when a mixed-sex group of drunken revellers stagger into an equestrian arena and frighten a horse which results in the female rider being thrown off her mount and killed. This is presented in a series of multi-angled shots interchanging between the horse and the rider to highlight the dramatic moment. Although the accident is reported in the newspapers the following day, the true cause of the fatality is covered up. This scene highlights the level of decadence on the resort but also points to the ability of the sufficiently wealthy and powerful men to prevent knowledge of scandalous activities from reaching the public domain.

The film additionally emphasises the corrupted activities on Kasorrnga by juxtaposing scenes on the island resort against the setting of Nina’s village. In contrast to the stylised modern architecture of Kasorrnga, with its swimming pools and lavishly decorated interior, Nina’s idyllic rural village features traditional Malay houses, sundry shops, and lush

landscape with a small river running through it. Adults are seen going about their daily business while children play traditional games outdoors. In a sharp contrast to the unabashed disco dancing on Kasorrnga, or to the models learning a fast Western-style choreographed dance routine, the village youths practise *kuda kepang*<sup>110</sup>, indicating attachment to their traditional roots. Nina herself is seen variously riding a bicycle with her sister, helping out with the family chores, or in her mother's sundry shop, unlike Meera and the models who spend their free time on gossiping or beautifying themselves. The village is also the setting used to reveal Datuk Shah's unscrupulous business promises to the villagers as opposed to the earnest plans of Nina's uncle to introduce beneficial developments to the residents.

More significantly, by presenting these contrasts, the film is openly didactic in its depiction of the follies of succumbing to temptation, and being seduced by the real-life sins and wickedness of 'bright lights and big city'. Although Meera and the models demonstrate autonomy in their choice of career and decisions in the hope of financial gain, they end up being taken advantage of by deceitful men; their dignity and self-respect, as well as cultural values are lost. In this way, the film's representation of Meera and the Blaze models as agent is complicated by their portrayal as victims of their own imprudence as well as of corrupted and designing men. This is made even more apparent in the narrative through the presence of Nina's character at Blaze. The narrative illustrates that Nina's agency and autonomy results from her educational achievement. Her aspirations and plans to assist in her uncle's business and political plans are not achieved through an exchange of sexual favours or through the forfeit of her self-dignity, unlike Meera who becomes the victim of her own dreams of wealth, greed, and social standing.

Meera is portrayed as a modern, successful businesswoman with high aspirations. Throughout the narrative, the decisions that Meera makes over her business dealings at Blaze and her personal life depict the level of autonomy that the film has established for her character. In comparison, Nina's portrayal, similar to that of Mastura's in *Selubung*, is also that of a modern Malaysian woman who displays a high level of agency in her aspirations and level of education. The film reveals Nina's independence and sense of responsibility through a positive attitude and readiness to help members of her family by finding a suitable vocation. In contrast with Meera, who throughout the film is portrayed as devoid of any family associations, Nina's character is revealed through a series of reunions with members of her

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<sup>110</sup> *Kuda Kepang* is a traditional Malay dance from the Malay state of Johor performed by nine dancers who are seated astride a two-dimensional horse made from hide or pleated rattan. *Kuda* means 'horse'.

family. As an employer, Meera is portrayed as being both strict and demanding and does not appear to show much compassion or concern for her models' personal problems, going so far as to tell them to 'get out of [her] sight' when they are late for an assignment. The film highlights this ruthless facet of Meera's character by contrasting it with the caring nature of Nina who is aware of her social and moral responsibilities and is portrayed as a 'big sister' figure to the models at Blaze, demonstrated when she helps to resolve the differences between two quarrelling models for instance.

In terms of images of sexuality, the film presents an obvious juxtaposition between Meera and Nina (see figure 10b). The film's portrayal of Meera's sexuality is initially suggested in a dramatic shot of her modelling jewellery at the party on Kasorrnga. The camera follows Meera walking down a flight of steps in a slow but highly exaggerated fashion. When she pauses mid-step, the camera zooms in frame by frame, providing a close-up shot of Meera looking extremely glamorous, sensual and posing with her arms held up in a stylised manner somewhat reminiscent of Gloria Swanson's pose in the staircase scene in *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950). The lighting and camera angle focusing on her face and upper torso in this pose highlights her beautiful features. Her sensual gaze is directed above the lens as if to indicate her awareness that all eyes are fixed upon her. At this point, the background music suddenly becomes louder and reaches a crescendo, extinguishing all other sounds, and serving to confirm that Meera is a significant female protagonist in the film. This is contrasted to the depiction of Nina's virginal sex appeal which is suggested in the mobile phone commercial which features her saying, '*Akulah penggoda*' (literally 'I am the seducer') in what seems to be more of a sweet rather than sultry tone. The close-up shot of Nina's face in the commercial shows a more fresh-faced and innocent expression as opposed to Meera's more femme fatale-like visage.

Figure 10b



Visually, therefore, Meera is presented as the liberated sexy siren, oozing sensuous sex appeal, as indicated in her outfits which are often in the sort of styles that accentuate her curvaceous figure. At various points in the film, attention is drawn to her face which shows make-up that artfully brings out her beauty while overlarge sunglasses frame her face; her



figure and demeanour represents the alluring and enigmatic female. Her portrayal contrasts with the depiction of Nina's character whose own source of attractiveness appears to be her innocence, her likeable personality and maturity. Despite her level of emancipation, Nina's character is still imbued with traditional Malay characteristics to highlight her virtuousness given how she is portrayed in terms of her close family relationship, her moral behaviour, and her virginal innocence. While Meera's sexuality is emphasised in the film through the use of make-up, fashion accessories and tight but expensive clothes Nina, in contrast, does not appear to require the usual accoutrements of make-up and figure-hugging attire to draw masculine attention. This is made evident in the narrative which suggests that, despite her natural beauty and her modern but modest dress, she still manages to capture the attention of Khal and Datuk Shah.

Apart from her physical appearance, the film's portrayal of Meera's sexuality is also achieved through her characterisation. The narrative reveals her as a cunning businesswoman who is able to negotiate matters pertaining to Blaze by using her sexy charm and flirtatious personality when dealing with business clients who are invariably men. The film additionally presents a licentious image of Meera by illustrating her overindulgence and partiality for glamour parties as evident in the nightclub scene where she is seen dressed in a shiny figure-hugging outfit, and dancing in an extremely seductive manner on a table, clearly intoxicated by drink. Here, the film cleverly utilises Nina and Khal's shocked expressions as they look on, as if to represent society's disapproval of Meera's behaviour. This allows for the juxtaposition of the filial and moral Nina against the self-indulgent and seductive Meera. From the perspective of classical Malay cinema, Meera is the immoral woman or *racun* (poison), who is contrasted with Nina, the traditional female stereotype of *penawar* (antidote)<sup>111</sup>. In this way, the film casts Nina's character as a polar opposite to Meera who is aware of her sexuality and uses it for her benefit. Nina, however, is portrayed as using her intelligence and amiable personality, as when she negotiates a business plan for her uncle and when she manages the clerical matters at Blaze.

The motif of sexuality is also given an immoral frame through the affair between Meera and Datuk Shah. Scenes focusing on their encounters are the only times when the film shows Meera's ruthless mask slipping and her facial expression resembling that of a woman in love. The film also uses the character of the highly sexualised Datuk Shah to reveal Meera's female desire and, therefore, depict the image of female sexuality. In the bedroom

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<sup>111</sup> Hamzah Hussin (1997) states that Malay films of the 1950s featured women with negative characters, as they played the roles of temptress, gold-digger and as the source of marital disintegration, thus personifying the poison of the world.

scene Meera appears out of the shower in a dressing gown, with a facial expression and purring moan which indicates that her desires have been satisfied and that she is basking in the 'afterglow' of their intimacy. In this instance, the film also further augments Meera's immorality evident in her action of having an affair with a married man. Her sexual attitude and awareness is, however, contrasted with Nina's virginal innocence. In the scene which features Khal engaging in physical intimacy by gently hugging Nina and telling her that he is attracted to and cares for her, Nina pulls away after an emotionally tense moment and earnestly pleads with him to leave when she realises that he has become aroused. The facial expression of the two female protagonists also demonstrates the difference in their sexual maturity. Unlike Meera, who visually and verbally indicates her emotional and physical satisfaction when she is in Datuk Shah's arms, Nina's facial expression, when she is embraced by Khal, implies that she is tentative and almost fearful, and also that she is inexperienced in terms of physical contact with members of the opposite sex. In this way, the film manages to maintain Nina's moral status by attributing her with a degree of virginal purity, while at the same time enhancing the image of Meera's sexual transgression.

Although Meera's character remains the shrewd, ruthless and ambitious businesswoman for the most part of the narrative, the film positions her emotional weakness and complicates her self-indulgent independence through the portrayal of her feelings for Datuk Shah. The narrative reveals how Meera allows her emotions to overrule her reason and be seduced by Datuk Shah to the extent of believing his promise of leaving his wife and children. Through the portrayal of Meera's feelings for the politician, the film explains how her character turns into a seemingly ruthless exploiter of her staff, members of her own sex, to pander to Datuk Shah's interests in Kasorrga and thus present herself in a more favourable light with the politician. In contrast, Nina asserts her agency, which is generated by her morals and principles, when she stands up to Datuk Shah and to his employees who treat her like one of the other female escorts. The film further enhances Meera's ruthlessness when she compromises the welfare and well-being of the models instead of protecting them. This is augmented through the contrasting portrayal of Nina who shows moral fortitude by defending all that is pure and dignified about her, the models at Blaze, and by extension all Malay women. In this way, the film suggests that Meera's independent persona, as represented by her actions in obtaining a successful modelling business, is tainted with immoral activities. Therefore, although Datuk Shah and his associates are portrayed as the villains of the story, Meera's character also functions as conduit and contributes to the film's portrayal of women

as sexual commodities particularly because she continues to allow the models to be subjected to prostitution in order for her business to flourish.

Despite the portrayal of her callous and self-centred behaviour, the film suggests some redeeming qualities in Meera's character, as evident for instance, in the strength of her relationship with Khal and his genuine despair at her death. The film also provides a hint of conscience to Meera's character as when she instructs Syam not to '*kacau*' (literally 'disturb') Nina and the new, inexperienced models and send them to Kasorrga. The turning point in Meera's character is presented in a verbally dramatic altercation between her and Nina in which Meera is directly accused of compromising the morals and integrity of her models. The scene marks the film's attempt to negotiate Meera's character partly through her interaction with Nina, whose conviction and moralistic nature attracts Khal and has a positive effect on the models at Blaze, and by extension, Meera. Meera redeems herself through a letter of apology to Nina, her explanation to Khal that she regrets her actions and wishes to make amends both with Nina and the models, and through her action of ensuring that the incriminating videotape of Datuk Shah reaches Khal. This portrayal of Meera's attempt at salvation, by taking significant action against her male oppressors, allows the film to create a tragic tone for her death.

*Figure 10c*



In order to justify her redeeming actions, the film turns Meera's character into victim at the point when she realises her own folly and the true devious and manipulative nature of Datuk Shah. As victim, Meera's character corresponds with the notion of the woman as a male psychological projection, for rather than being Datuk Shah's wife-in-waiting, Meera has merely served the purpose of gratifying the politician's sexual needs and is little better than the other models/prostitutes that she has pimped out on Kasorrga. Meera's realisation and reflection on the error of her ways is illustrated in an emotional scene which sees her breaking down into floods of tears in her car and when she expresses her regret to Khal in her apartment. The emotional quality injected into her internal conflict in these scenes is enhanced through the film's theme song as a non-diegetic element. The haunting ballad, with lyrics that allude to mistakes and to the notion of losing one's true self to the influence of

materialism and self-indulgent pleasures, appears to be the film's attempt to turn Meera into a sympathetic figure. Yet despite the portrayal of Meera's redeeming characteristics, the film, nevertheless, kills her off and thus likens her to a tragic figure by virtue of her rectifying actions prior to her death. The sense of tragedy is achieved in an emotional scene which features Khal sobbing uncontrollably and cradling Meera's body (see figure 10c). The film further injects a melodramatic tone, again through the use of the theme song, and a flashback montage of Meera in action to emphasise the tragedy and the damaging aspects of her glamorous life and immoral behaviour that finally brings about her destruction.

The conclusion of the film thus presents the predictable outcome of the immoral woman – and more multifaceted character – who dies in the narrative while the villainous male characters, notably Datuk Shah and his cohorts, literally get away with murder. More significantly, however, just as the female characters contrast sharply with Nina's sensual purity, so the male characters are used in the film to point to the reality of traditionally accepted gender behaviour, as suggested in the portrayal of Nina's uncle and brother Mat. On a contextual level, the film illustrates vices that appear to have accompanied rapid acquisition of wealth and power with Malaysia's modernisation, as embodied by Datuk Shah. *Ringgit Kasorrga*, nonetheless, negotiates its significance by utilising melodramatic tropes that serve both as a morality tale and a mirror of the reality within Malaysian society in the 1990s, at the height of the Mahathir era. Rapidly modernising Malaysia was, and is, still seeing a drift to towns and rapid westernisation of society which has brought with it habits and attitudes at odds with Malay Muslim culture. What the film seems to signal here is a reminder to Malay women – and a lesser extent Malay men – to be mindful of their conduct and place in society. The heroine is seen as a character worthy of emulation as her confidence (and agency) demonstrates that she does not require male attention to validate her existence. The triple 'anchors' of family, morals, and education allow her to emerge unscathed from her dealings with the likes of Meera and Datuk Shah. In contrast, Meera and the Blaze models do not have the security of family and tradition that provide sufficiently deep roots to prevent them from being swayed by temptation of money, glamour and other forbidden pleasurable negotiations.

### ***Perempuan, Isteri Dan...? (1994)***

From the beginning, the setting of *Perempuan, Isteri dan ...?* highlights the patriarchal structures that exist in Malay-Muslim culture, which reflect that women are generally dependent on their fathers or husbands in most areas of their lives. By positioning the story in a Malay village, the film confirms the notion that in Malay, and indeed most Islamic cultures,

all men regardless of whether or not they are related, are responsible for the moral welfare, protection and guidance of women, as demonstrated, for instance, through the character of Amir's brother, Halim, and some of the village men<sup>112</sup>. The film demonstrates this patriarchally defined expectation that Malay culture imposes upon young women in the scenes revolving around Zaleha's elopement, enhanced by the visual absence of Zaleha. Instead, the narrative operates through verbal references to Zaleha, which seems to suggest the inconsequential value of her character in the marriage arrangement except in the capacity of the bride-to-be. Although absent from the scene, this representation of Zaleha initially corresponds with the notion of the virtuous woman who demonstrates filial piety in her acquiescence to the wishes of her family. Her physical absence in these early scenes is followed up with a shot of the ladder leaning against what is presumably Zaleha's bedroom window. By using the open window, the film likens Zaleha's action to an escaped prisoner, and thus transforms her character into Gledhill's independent persona who defies parental authority, causes uproar in her village community, and insults the male ego of the groom-to-be. These are actions that would be clearly perceived as contravening the traditional, patriarchal norms at the heart of her *kampung*.

The film augments the impact of Zaleha's action through the *kampung* setting, which is the 'heartbeat' of Malay society where cultural and religious norms are rooted. In the *kampung*, the notion of masculinity is defined by a man's economic power and moral authority over his womenfolk. In the eyes of *kampung* folk, who represent Malay society, Zaleha's last-minute elopement, which occurs when all wedding preparations are completed and her intended groom has arrived, would be viewed as bringing shame (*malu*) upon her parents, as well as the groom, Amir<sup>113</sup>. What adds to the scandal here is that Zaleha's entire *kampung* is present to witness that she has eloped, as depicted through the look of shame and despair on her parents' faces, which indicates the humiliation that her character has brought, not just upon herself but also upon her whole family. The effects of her action are also implied in the stunned facial expressions of the guests and the groom's entourage and, more significantly, the look of embarrassment and anger on Amir's face. The effect of Zaleha's action is further heightened through excess elements in the form of the *kompang*'s

<sup>112</sup> A young woman, from the onset of puberty, prepares to become a suitable candidate for marriage so that she then no longer functions as a proverbial 'burden' to her father and thus embarks on the other roles expected of her in life: as wife and subsequently, as mother, and the 'ward' of another man, this time her husband (Rohana, 1991; Norfaridah, 2005).

<sup>113</sup> Malays take the concept of *malu* seriously given that society places importance upon the appearance of solid family background – including honesty, religious faith and chaste womenfolk. Malays consider a sense of *malu* as necessary for social good – somewhat similar to a sense of propriety (Goddard, 2005, p. 80)

reverberating sound<sup>114</sup> and the shot of Zaleha's photograph falling off the wall, the glass frame shattering into pieces.

It is also the concept of *malu*, in this case the result of a severely bruised male ego given that most of Zaleha's village has witnessed his rejection that triggers Amir's wrath and leads to the ensuing sequence of dramatic events that drive the plot forward with tragic consequences. The film illustrates this in a histrionic portrayal of Amir's display of anger, climaxing when Amir shoots Zaleha's new husband in cold blood, depicting the fury of the scorned Malay male ego in a melodramatic manner that is reminiscent of villains in Malay films prior to the 1990s as well as reflecting classic Indian cinema influences. This concept is again emphasised in the scene when Salina, the daughter of a respected family in Amir's *kampung*, is accused of *khalwat* (close proximity) after being caught alone with Bakri, a young villager. The young woman's transgression is captured in the scene that sees the whole village descend upon the *surau* (village mosque) to witness the shame, not just of Salina, but more importantly of her father. The film articulates the paternal wrath and shame again through the element of excess when Salina's father slaps her across the face as the camera shot focuses on the agony and humiliation apparent in his face, while others look on and her mother sobs uncontrollably in the arms of a female relative. The impact of Salina's independent actions, like Zaleha's, is again framed in a negative context, indicated through the shots of the villagers who stare at the spectacle and who make whispered comments to each other. The film thus implies that Salina's actions are still viewed as being immoral and scandalous even though Bakri humbly announces that he wishes to marry her.

The *kampung* setting provides a means of juxtaposing Zaleha's character against those of the other women who embody the traditional roles as mothers, wives and daughters. The film illustrates this in scenes showing these women performing the conventional duties of housekeeping, cooking and raising children while the men work or meet to discuss village politics. When Zaleha first arrives at Amir's house the film demonstrates that she is expected to conform to this traditional role when Amir instructs her to 'get on with what housewives normally do'. This is more specifically illustrated through the contrast with Zaleha's neighbour Kamariah who is portrayed as the typical housewife who ensures that her larder is always well stocked with a constant supply of necessary culinary ingredients which she is able to lend to Zaleha. Kamariah is also seen in the maternal role of bathing her children and

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<sup>114</sup> A *kompang* is a traditional Malay hand-held drum used mostly at weddings and certain important functions to mark the arrival of the bride/groom or a special guest.

constantly looks after them, even when she goes into town with Zaleha. The film, nevertheless, injects an element of female emancipation through Asiah's character who speaks up to her husband about her efforts to enhance their financial standing when he complains about the neglect of her domestic duties. In this way, the film presents a continuum between Zaleha, the independent persona who asserts her sexuality, and the village women who represent traditional, patriarchally defined women in their roles as dependent and unsexual exemplary wives. The portrayal of Asiah's character, in between these two positions, seems to function as a didactic element that alludes to the importance of financial autonomy in order for the female characters to resist patriarchal control and achieve a high level of independence.

The idea of patriarchal control is also evident when the women are seen carrying out the typical village exercise of washing clothes on the riverbank, a practice that harks back to a bygone era. The film demonstrates that female activity is, nevertheless, very much regulated by the male characters when Amir's brother Halim interrupts their playful antics and instructs the women to quickly finish their chores and go home. Halim, therefore, exemplifies male authority and a religious voice which the film contrasts to Amir's egotistical cruelty. Patriarchal suppression is also demonstrated in the highly testosterone-laced scene where Kamariah's husband publicly slaps her after she returns from her sojourn to the nearby town with Zaleha. Kamariah's husband is portrayed as exercising his misogynistic authority when he chastises and humiliates her in front of the other men who are in turn depicted as showing their territorial authority over their village, and by extension their womenfolk, by attacking and beating up the truck driver and his friend for being with Zaleha, Kamariah and her children. This scene also illustrates what seems to be the male point of view that patriarchal authority extends to all women, exemplified when Kamariah's husband reminds Zaleha, 'You can't behave like this. You are somebody's wife.'

The film also addresses this notion of Zaleha's role of 'wife' (*isteri*) – as highlighted in the film's title – in a didactic frame, as if to present the more even-handed side of patriarchal authority, and to suggest that the role of wife is something that would 'save' Zaleha from her status as the fallen woman. This is evident when Halim reminds Amir of the true meaning of Zaleha's status as his wife after he witnesses Amir's cruel treatment of Zaleha. In this way, the film offers the prevailing cultural and religious view of the Malay husband who to a large extent defines the role of the wife and who has the license to protect and guide the wife towards 'the righteous path', regardless of her misdeeds.

The motif reflecting what Malay society regards as the proper role of husband is again repeated in the tense final scenes of the film when Halim physically restrains Amir and repeatedly tells him that irrespective of her sins and wrongdoings, Zaleha is still his '*isteri*'. Halim's action in this scene echoes the advice of the religious official in Golok who tells Amir and Zaleha that, 'Everyone is weak. But we must always try to improve ourselves and return to the path of virtue', thus implying the moral lesson in the film that is made even more palpable through the depiction of Zaleha's transgression and Amir's arrogant vindictiveness, and failure in the capacity of husband expected by Malay-Muslim culture. The title of *Perempuan, Isteri dan...?* itself betrays the trajectory of the narrative which is the portrayal of the heroine as woman, wife and, tragically, '...' (whore). What appears to be the tragedy of the film is that the youthful, naïve and materialistic Zaleha is transformed into the 'whore' by Amir. Amir's inability to truly see Zaleha as a wife, despite her best efforts, is indicated in his cruel treatment of her. He sees only the prostitute – his creation and also the manifestation of his failure as a Malay male. According to traditional Malay societal norms, it is up to male figureheads such as fathers and husbands to ensure that their womenfolk are protected and behave in a moral fashion. Moreover, in Islam, it is also a husband's duty to ensure that his wife's spiritual, material and physical needs are met. Amir fails on all counts: as protector, provider and suitor, despite Halim's reminders that Zaleha is now his wife. Zaleha reverts to type, the whore in search of physical fulfilment – validation even – that she cannot obtain at home, and is, as a result, both a victim of her own immorality as well as her husband's folly.

Although Zaleha is unlike the independent and virtuous heroines discussed in previous chapters, her character still fits the notion of the independent female protagonist who, albeit through her sexuality, negotiates her way through her immediate *milieu* as a result of suppression. When Zaleha arrives in Amir's village she begins to assert herself by flaunting her sexuality in front of the village men and taking pleasure in their reactions, staying in control of her power over them until the final scenes of the film. The fact that the concept of female sexual autonomy is regarded by Malay society as largely an alien concept makes Zaleha's portrayal all the more sensational. The film builds up the introduction to Zaleha in a dramatic manner and establishes her character first as the 'runaway bride' who acts autonomously for the sake of love, and thus demonstrates her defiance and rebellion against the cultural norms set by her family and society. At the same time, Zaleha's character also fits the notion of the melodramatic victim particularly in the tense scene in which she is virtually rejected by her first husband who chooses his own life when Amir confronts him with pistol in hand. The melodramatic intensity of the scene is created through the physical and verbal



expression of Amir's wrath and through Zaleha's constant yelling, uncontrollable crying, and the look of fear on both Zaleha and her husband's faces. The film enhances Zaleha's image as the victim when her husband is killed by Amir, for not only does she lose the man who is perceived to be her male protector (husband), she is then sold to another man – the Thai pimp – who consequently turns her into a prostitute. Zaleha's portrayal as the victim is also apparent when Amir returns for her and she is transformed from the rebellious yet sexually innocent village girl into the fallen woman by virtue of having been forced into prostitution. And it is also at this point in the film that Zaleha assumes the *jalang* (whore) role, as suggested in the ellipses in the film's censored title.

The portrayal of Zaleha as the sexual figure continues from the moment she leaves the brothel with Amir, as she negotiates her position and safety by manipulating him with gentle conversation and by yielding to his every command. At this point in the narrative, the film seems to offer a compassionate treatment of Zaleha's character through the portrayal of Amir's cruel attitude towards her. This is evident in the scene which sees Amir instructing her to sleep on the hotel-room floor declaring that the bed is only meant for his (presumably chaste) wife, not a common prostitute like Zaleha whom he deems *hanyir* (fishy or foul-smelling). As Amir is mainly responsible for turning her into a prostitute, the film seems to offer no sympathy for his character when they are apprehended by the Islamic religious authorities for *khalwat* (close proximity). Instead, the incident exemplifies Zaleha's cunning as she is the one who has secretly alerted the authorities in order to trap Amir into marriage and help improve her depraved status. The sympathetic treatment of Zaleha is further evident when the film suggests that the redemption of her status from that of a fallen woman seems possible when she becomes Amir's wife. Zaleha's act of marrying Amir and her subsequent attempts to contribute to the relationship in her precarious marriage signifies her attempt at eradicating the past and starting afresh from the point when they were supposed to have been married, when she was still pure and untouched by men. The film also induces a sense of pity for Zaleha's character through the depiction of her efforts at assuming the role of wife illustrated, for instance, through the number of dishes prepared for Amir's evening meal and the feminine touches added to his house.

The depiction of Amir's harsh treatment of Zaleha, however, again adds to her sympathetic position and enhances the image of Zaleha as a melodramatic figure, but at the same time contributes to the downward spiral of her character. For instance, when Zaleha seeks attention by putting on a new outfit and asking if the outfit looks good on her, Amir roughly grabs her by the arm tearing one of the sleeves in the process, and angrily demanding

*Figure 10d*

to know where she obtained the money to pay for such an outfit (see figure 10d). And when he discovers the food prepared and served by her is bland he spits it out and chastises her for not using salt, to which she exclaims that he did not purchase any. The intensity of Amir's harshness suggests an element of ambivalence in the film's treatment of the heroine. This is evident, for instance, in the scene showing Amir flinging some money onto the floor and instructing Zaleha to immediately purchase some salt from the sundry shop even though night has fallen and the shop is shut. Amir also refuses to allow his sister-in-law, alarmed by Amir's rage, to accompany her in search of the missing flavour enhancer. It is clear that what infuriates Amir in this instance is Zaleha's presumption; she has taken liberties by having outfits tailored, and preening herself in front of his family – an indication of her autonomy and defiance of his power.

The narrative, nevertheless, reveals that despite the fact that Amir murdered her first husband and is responsible for selling her into prostitution, Zaleha still views Amir as her chance for redemption, but his anger and pride prohibit this. In this way, the film retains Zaleha as the figure of the fallen woman and negotiates the issue of female sexuality and desire by presenting it in both a marital and an immoral frame. The change in Zaleha's character is first signalled in the scene where she yanks the tablecloth off the dining table causing the dishes she has prepared to crash onto the floor – an element of excess used here to indicate her frustration when Amir fails to return home. From this point onwards, Zaleha's character begins to show a flirtatious and seductive side, using her sexuality to her advantage. Zaleha is aware of her physical attributes, and exercises her sexual agency through the use of her feminine charms to negotiate her way throughout the rest of the narrative<sup>115</sup>.

The film visually negotiates the motif of female sexuality embodied in Zaleha's character through, for instance, the brief scene partially showing Zaleha's body in the shower at the hotel room. The close-up and seemingly male point-of-view shot of Zaleha in the

<sup>115</sup> 'The transformed [Zaleha becomes] someone whom the husband can no longer understand, let alone control. Ironically, what is meted out as "punishment" by him, i.e. being a "whore", has become her source and reservoir' (Zawawi, 2003, p. 152).

shower reveals her in profile right down to her bare shoulders. The next frame shows her sitting in a bathtub but this time with her knees raised displaying an expanse of leg; her facial expression reveals what appears to be her sensual enjoyment of the shower. Zaleha's sensual nature is again depicted in the scene which features her joining the women by the river but diverting their attention from completing their washing task by inviting them to swim – an act accompanied by much splashing, shrieking and laughter. The suggestion here is not just that Zaleha seeks relief from what is portrayed as the boredom of domestic duty, but also that she enjoys indulging her physical senses, an image introduced in the shower scene at the hotel, and suggested when she tells them that she enjoys bathing in the river because the cold water feels good, as if the film is hinting at the notion of the 'cold shower' which alleviates and contains sexual desire. Zaleha's willingness to utilise her feminine assets is also evident when she brazenly converses with cloth seller Majid, with her modesty preserved only by a sarong tied about her chest, revealing her shoulders and arms and thus flaunting her sensuality. And when Zaleha is unable to pay for all her purchases, she informs Majid, in a highly suggestive manner, that she would find 'other' (sexual) means of paying him for her purchases – illustrating her only tool for survival.

*Figure 10e*



Zaleha's sexuality is also clearly portrayed through her manner of dress and physical gestures. When Zaleha gets Kamariah to accompany her to a nearby town, for instance, she persuades her neighbour to put on a modern-styled *baju kurung* that emphasises the feminine figure. The brazen nature of Zaleha's sensuality is also illustrated in the scene in which she attracts the attention of the truck driver by teasing him with flirtatious stares and by suggestively toying with her straw (see figure 10e). And when Zaleha convinces Kamariah to accept the man's invitation to the cinema, she points out the unfairness in the circumstance of housewives who are restricted to the home. The implication that the film offers through Zaleha's remarks is that the ennui and neglect that she experiences as Amir's wife has caused Zaleha to assert her autonomy by using her sexuality to seek recreation and amusement, telling Kamariah that she experiences an adrenalin rush after flirting with the truck driver. The

film thus enhances the image of the fallen woman in its portrayal of Zaleha as a woman who enjoys the risk of employing her sexual attractiveness, for when Kamariah warns her about the dangers of such feelings Zaleha blatantly states that she enjoys it. The portrayal of Zaleha as an independent heroine, therefore, incorporates her desire to satisfy her senses and to fulfil her needs.

The image of sexuality exuded by Zaleha's character is probably most clearly illustrated in the scene in which she sits on a low stool in the kitchen, legs slightly apart with her sarong hoisted up round her knees, facing an electric fan. The film presents the sexuality that emanates from Zaleha in her gesture of using a plate as a fan to cool her nether regions with one hand whilst holding a lit cigarette in the other; a close-up shot shows her uplifted face, her eyelids slightly lowered before her face lights up as her mouth breaks into a slight smile (see figure 10f). The film augments Zaleha's sexuality through her facial expression which indicates some kind of sexual pleasure gained from being watched as suggested by the shot of her looking directly into the camera to indicate her awareness of Tapa looking at her through a hole in the wall.

Figure 10f



Figure 10g



The film connects the power of feminine sexuality with traditional Malay custom in a controversial scene that is often mentioned in reviews but is censored to cinema audiences because it infringes upon Islamic principles. In the notorious *nasi kangkang*<sup>116</sup> (straddled rice) scene, Zaleha stands over a hot bowl of rice intended for Amir and allows the rising steam to cause her vaginal fluids to drip into the bowl (see figure 10g). The narrative consequently reveals that Amir is affected by the spell and in this way the film presents a role reversal as Zaleha is now the one in control. Amir has been emasculated and Zaleha has the opportunity to turn the tables on Amir – who has failed to provide for her sufficiently and has not satisfied

<sup>116</sup> Some Southeast Asian cultures believe that virginal fluids, including menstrual blood, have special supernatural powers and are commonly used by individuals and *bomohs* in rituals. According to Malay folklore, a woman who feeds her husband or boy friend with *nasi kangkang* can have absolute control over him. As demonstrated by Zaleha, the female must squat (*kangkang*) over a pot of steaming hot rice. The combination of condensed sweat and virginal fluids are then allowed to drip into the pot of rice. The fluids are mixed thoroughly with the rice and served to the clueless man together with his favourite dishes.

*Figure 10h*

her physical needs – by refusing him his conjugal rights. The visual depiction of female sexuality in the film culminates in the scene which suggests that Zaleha engages in sexual relations with Tapa in the rubber plantation (see figure 10h). This image of Zaleha asserting her sexuality is cleverly interspersed with the scene in which Amir changes a flat tyre. The intensity of this scene is created through the sound and visual presentation of the torrential downpour and the shot of Zaleha, in wet clothing, walking seductively towards Tapa before committing the (suggested) sexual act. Zaleha's portrayal as the fallen woman in the narrative reaches its pinnacle here.

The film concludes with a series of dramatic scenes that begin with Tapa killing cloth-seller Majid who arrives at the village one evening for a secret assignation with Zaleha. The drama is further enhanced by shots of a calf being slaughtered for a feast to welcome a politician who is visiting the village the following day. When Zaleha expresses her disgust at Tapa's inability to comprehend not just societal boundaries but also those set by Zaleha herself, he confronts her at her house and tries to persuade her to run away with him. At this point, Zaleha realises that she has destroyed all her chances of eliminating her past and regaining some form of social standing. True to the melodramatic conventions of both Western and Asian cinema, Zaleha's character is killed at the end of the narrative. In terms of the fallen woman structure, Zaleha's character, as illustrated above, corresponds to the notion of the innocent victim of a male oppressor, and is later given a chance at recovery through her role as wife. Yet, as the narrative reveals, Zaleha seems to be tainted by the experience of prostitution (and of her husband's neglect), drifts further into sexually immoral activities, and does not atone for her immoral and, in the eyes of Islam, sinful ways. The moment in which she is killed therefore seems to verify that the destruction of Zaleha and her threatening power is necessary for the resurgence of the patriarchal structure that she has so blatantly challenged. Her character has to die because the closure of the classical narrative endorses the restoration of patriarchal order, and the transgressing woman is either forgiven and subordinated to that order, or punished, usually by death.

The pattern in classical Hollywood melodrama, and in effect mainstream Malay cinema, shows that, ideologically, films that feature the fallen woman deal with the disturbance of a patriarchal structure which occurs when a female character is banished from

Figure 10i



the family and, given the lack of protection provided by a father or husband, is forced to fend for herself. Mostly, such films appear to typically highlight the consequences of parental or marital failure and therefore serve as a cautionary tale, illustrating what is in store for the woman who permits herself to stray from the path of virtue. *Perempuan, Isteri dan...?* demonstrates that by killing Zaleha, Amir eliminates the defiant woman who is the dominant representation of female desire in the village. In this highly tense scene, Zaleha comes to the realisation that there appears to be ‘no way out’ for her (see figure 10i). Exasperated by yet another one of Amir’s displays of rage, and what she considers as his inadequate performance as husband, she asserts her defiance for the final time and responds by exclaiming that his performance as husband was simply ‘*macam tu aje*’ (average or unremarkable), to which he responds by slashing her with the machete he has seized from Tapa. Zaleha’s death, therefore, marks the end of female sexual autonomy and agency that confronts the patriarchal structure in the village. *Perempuan, Isteri dan...?* reveals that such a flagrant challenge to patriarchal order is not tolerated and is dealt with in a melodramatic manner. While Zaleha does not have the power to defeat patriarchy she instead expresses autonomy by choosing death.

### ***Buai Laju-Laju (2004)***

*Buai Laju-Laju*, inspired by *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnet, 1946), is another film by U-Wei that deals with the emotions and the desires of a woman who sees herself caught in an idle and futile life, and uses men to her advantage. The independent heroine’s persona is modelled after the quintessential *femme fatale* of film noir who uses her sexual attractiveness and ruthless cunning to manipulate men in order to gain power, independence and financial security. Zaitun’s portrayal as the independent heroine and *femme fatale* represents a direct attack on traditional Malay-Muslim womanhood. Zaitun’s portrayal illustrates the motif of betrayal and motivates the narrative development. The film inserts the perspective of conventional Malay society through the character of Pak Haji who, like Halim in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*, voices the concern of his community to Zaitun and Amran about living in close proximity after Ibrahim’s death. He encourages them to marry in order to

prevent a scandal while some customers at the stall speculate on the relationship between Amran and Zaitun.

In Western cinematic traditions, the classic *femme fatale* resorts to murder to free herself from an unbearable relationship with a man who tries to possess and control her. In this film, Zaitun is the cunning manipulator who deviously organises her strategies in her objective to attain a luxurious life. Her motivation is defined by her statement to Amran: 'I've never had money in my life' when he assures her that he would always take care of her 'for better or worse'. Zaitun is quick-witted and strikes when an opportunity arises. She uses her alleged pregnancy and Amran's feelings for her to influence him into 'doing something about' (killing) Ibrahim in order to inherit his land; she pretends to be the anguished widow at the police station in order to convince the police of her innocence in Ibrahim's accident; she blows the whistle on the blackmailing photographer to the police; she explains the banker's visit to Amran in a circuitous manner in order to fool him into thinking that her plans are for their future benefit; and she cleverly fakes her death in the car crash in order to leave the country with her new-found wealth.

Marriage for the *femme fatale* is associated with unhappiness, boredom and the absence of romantic love and sexual desire. Similarly, Zaitun appears to play the role of the obedient wife who works at the eatery, but her subsequent actions and involvement with Amran reveal that she finds marriage to Ibrahim to be confining and dull. The absence of children is another sign of sterility in their marriage<sup>117</sup> and her supposed pregnancy is used to show her manipulation of Ibrahim (to satisfy her material pleasures) and of Amran (into disposing of Ibrahim). The narrative suggests that her marriage to Ibrahim was one of convenience as she tells Amran that she had 'literally been picked by Ibrahim' when she failed to become a successful actress and refused to return home to village life. The film, nevertheless, seems ambiguous in its attitude towards Zaitun's discontent in her marriage. In terms of her circumstances, the film illustrates the ennui that Zaitun experiences as a result of Ibrahim's elderly age<sup>118</sup>, their modest home and unexciting lifestyle despite his financial capability, and the secluded setting in which their home and business are positioned. Zaitun's pleasure and ambition is instead defined by material goods. The film illustrates her materialistic nature when she pesters Ibrahim to go after Amran and claim payment for his

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<sup>117</sup> Childless couples are far more common in film noir than the traditional father-mother-children nuclear family. Zaitun uses her pregnancy to demand for an expensive lunch of *ikan kurau* and to obtain fabric for new clothes.

<sup>118</sup> Ibrahim's age is conveyed through Amran's mistaken assumption that Ibrahim is Zaitun's elderly relative and through the policemen's remarks on Zaitun's youth in contrast to her husband's age when questioning Amran about the accident.

lunch, but does not tell her husband that Amran has paid half the cost. And when they attempt to run away, Zaitun creates a huge fuss about her ruined shoes, citing their cost. She also tells Amran on one of their secret meetings: ‘I don’t want a hard living’.

However, as the spouse of the *femme fatale*, Ibrahim is not presented as aloof, maimed or paralysed like the typical film noir husband who is incapable of providing gratification to the heroine. Ibrahim appears to be a respected member of his community, as suggested when Pak Haji invites him to be involved in the community *gotong-royong* (a group clean-up) of the village cemetery. Ibrahim is also seen to be affectionate and shows interest in his wife – he takes her (and Amran) out for lunch where she insists on having an *ikan kurau*<sup>119</sup> dish and he goes out of his way to purchase some new fabric when she presses him to do so. It is also through Ibrahim’s character that the film presents Zaitun as a desirable object as when he snuggles up to her in the kitchen in Amran’s presence and says: ‘who else should I kid around with if not my own wife’<sup>120</sup>. Ibrahim, further indicating his delight at having a youthful and beautiful wife, also tells Amran that her stage name was Zai Rahman, which serves to enhance Zaitun’s allure and desirability in Amran’s eyes. In this way, the film augments the portrayal of Zaitun’s coldness and evil intentions as it is clear that despite the attention that Ibrahim gives her, the family home atmosphere is still dull for the young, ambitious, and sexually exciting *femme fatale* who quietly plans her fruitful escape.

In relation to the *femme fatale* persona, Zaitun’s portrayal as the independent woman combines sensuality with self-interest as she uses her feminine charms to influence the male protagonists. As the film does not reveal the narrative through a flashback of Amran’s subjective memory (the mode in many Hollywood film noir), Zaitun is established as an intense sexual presence that becomes the object of Amran’s obsessive desire through his point of view. Although Zaitun initially appears to be the obedient and passive wife, the narrative gradually reveals her assertiveness and cunning at controlling Amran and disposing of Ibrahim. The film expresses the threat posed by Zaitun as the sexually independent woman through the *mise en scène* and through Zaitun’s character traits. Zaitun’s first appearance, for instance, is associated with the swing (*buai*), on which she sits and rocks gently. This is the only time that the film shows the swing as if it is a demarcation of Zaitun’s visual and sexual

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<sup>119</sup> *Kurau* or threadfin is generally regarded as an expensive, meaty and delicious fish. There are a variety of fish dishes that Zaleha could feast upon as fish curries are very popular amongst Malays. Her specific choice of *kurau* indicates her penchant for luxurious pleasures.

<sup>120</sup> Women of *film noir* are presented “as prizes, desirable objects” (Sylvia Harvey, 1978).



dominance. This notion is first suggested by the opening credits which are visually presented against a black backdrop and in a swinging motion.

Figure 10j



Like the *femme fatale* of film noir, Zaitun's persona and sensuality are illustrated by an appreciative shot of her bare legs in her introductory scene, seen from the viewpoint of Amran who is consequently seduced (see figure 10j). The frame then focuses on her back, taking in Zaitun's body from head to rear with her face also initially obscured by the magazine she is reading. Zaitun then alights from the swing stepping onto a mat on the ground, a movement that again shows off her curvaceous figure to best advantage. She then lies down on the mat and rolling onto her back notices Amran for the first time. All the while the swing is still very gently swaying and is the only thing Amran sees when he looks up again after washing up at the nearby stream. Zaitun is again associated with the swing at the end of the film, when Amran likens her beauty to a *pantun* (Malay poem) and recites the lyrics of a traditional song '*Buai Laju-Laju*'<sup>121</sup> which also inspires the film's title.

In addition, the film uses the entertainment magazine 'HAI'<sup>122</sup> that Zaitun reads at various points in the story to illustrate her preoccupation with the luxuries and glamour of celebrity life, particularly since Zaitun herself failed to become a commercial actress. The magazine is also the initial physical contact point between Zaitun and Amran when they engage in a mini 'tug-of-war' over the magazine. Zaitun's flirtatious manner in this scene also serves as a first indication to Amran that it is permissible to be familiar with her and therefore denotes her subsequent manipulative plans that lead to his ruin. The painting on the wall in the restaurant where the three protagonists have lunch, which shows a steep ravine that plunges into the sea, also seems to function as a forewarning, signalling the plan hatched by

<sup>121</sup> '*Buai laju-laju/ Sampai pokok sena/ Apa ada dalam baju/ Sepohon bunga Cina*'. This is a popular traditional nursery rhyme/song. My literal translation is as follows: 'swing my swing high/ up to the *angsana* (rosewood) tree/ what lies beneath the clothing/ a bunch of Chinese flowers'. The last line, in particular, has often been re-written to suit various slogans or messages. Amran misses out the last line as if to point to the incomplete and unfulfilled nature of his liaison with Zaitun.

<sup>122</sup> The idea to observe the significance of the magazine is suggested by Hassan Muthalib on the internet. Discussion of its significance is my own. 'HAI' is a weekly magazine that features the latest news, information and coverage of happenings in the entertainment, sports and recreation world in Malaysia and in various other countries in Asia and the West.

the lovers and the accident which leads to Ibrahim's death. Although the visual depiction of the actual accident is absent from the narrative, Amran's criminal act is referred to by Zaitun during their public altercation over Rubi. The painting in the restaurant therefore, also signifies the steep abyss that Amran plunges into as a result of his involvement with Zaitun, which consequently leads to his destruction.

The film draws attention to Zaitun's body through her clothing items. She is always seen in a figure-hugging *kebaya* (Malay dress) – when Amran goes into the kitchen he is presented with a rear-view of her hips as she is bent over attending to a task. And when Amran begins clearing-up as payment for his lunch, he has to deftly manoeuvre around Zaitun's washing, particularly her red and black lacy underwear, which both helps to illustrate her sensuality and to portend the peril that Amran eventually finds himself in. Zaitun is also seen in a sarong tied around her chest (*berkemban*) in scenes that involve Amran, as if to accentuate the effect of her sensual charm on the hero and to enhance her physical appearance as the *femme fatale*. For example, Zaitun takes a nocturnal soak in the stream and admits to Amran that she enjoys '*mandi malam*' (literally 'a night bath') before going on to indulge in an illicit tryst with Amran and later uses her sensual magnetism to control him (see figure 10k). Their betrayal of Ibrahim is illustrated through a shot of their merging shadows and silhouettes by the fireside.

Figure 10k



The film's depiction of female desire is made evident from the time Zaitun sets eyes on Amran. The film presents Zaitun's visual perspective by focusing on the shirtless Amran's muscular torso as if to highlight his attractiveness and virility, particularly when contrasted against Ibrahim. This image is repeated when she secretly observes Amran performing the task set by Ibrahim from a window in her house. The proximity of this shot, suggesting that Zaitun is spying on Amran, also signifies his subsequent role as pawn in her machinations as the roles are reversed when, later in the story, he plays the alienated voyeur spying on Zaitun. Their mutual attraction is made even more obvious when they first meet in the kitchen. The film illustrates Zaitun's desire through the glazed look in her eyes as she maintains eye contact with Amran and displays a slight smile on her face to the point of being oblivious to

the sound of the whistling kettle – the shot of boiling kettle suggesting the intensity of their ensuing liaison.

*Figure 10l*



A consistent aspect of film noir pertains to its most intrinsic character motif – alienation. The flaw in most noir films is also the failure on the part of the male protagonists to recognise the dishonesty inherent in the principal female character (Butler, 1985). Amran's portrayal corresponds with this structure as his character is consistent with the notion of the typical hero of film noir. His characterisation is a stark contrast to the traditional hero of mainstream Malay cinema, as Amran appears to be alienated from conventional Malay society, is eventually pursued by the police and is morally ambiguous. He gambles at a game of snooker but is unable to make the payment when he loses the match, just as he gambles with his life when he chooses to engage in a dangerous liaison with Zaitun. And although his conscience is pricked and he says, 'he has done nothing wrong to me' when he realises what Zaitun wants done to Ibrahim, he succumbs to his desire for Zaitun and carries out the deed. Amran is therefore ostensibly a hero (from his macho demeanour, physique and confidence) but a character who is defined by his dark characteristics and by the fate that inevitably overtakes him. Despite Ibrahim's kindness and belief in him, Amran executes Zaitun's plans; he uses Rubi's interest in him as a stopgap before dumping her to go back to Zaitun; he claims to despise being secluded at Ibrahim's stall, leaves Zaitun, only to seem energised at the prospect of seeing her again when he runs into Ibrahim; he engages in a public altercation with Zaitun, pushes her over but returns to find her when the police are in pursuit. Amran is 'impelled toward his fate by exterior forces beyond his power and interior forces beyond his control' (Butler, 1985, p. 130). His job at the eatery provides him with board and lodging and a means of living; the trust that Ibrahim grants him allows him to engage in the illicit affair with Zaitun but the feelings and the desire that he develops for her consumes and destroys him. His fixation with Zaitun is best illustrated when he goes into her bedroom, smells her perfume and gauges the softness of her bed with his hands. He also plays the voyeur when he spies on Ibrahim and Zaitun being playful in their sitting-room and looks jealously through a

barred window – a premonition of his fate when he is shown through the jail bars while awaiting his execution (see figure 10l).

Zaitun's transgression of traditional Malay norms leads to the destruction of the men who are attracted to her, making them the tragic victims of the *femme fatale*. The unexpected twist at the end – when Zaitun leaves the bank in her brand new Western-style outfit, sits comfortably in her chauffeur-driven car and touches up her make-up on the way to the airport – marks the film's illustration of Zaitun's complete emancipation as she frees herself from patriarchal dictates having successfully duped all the male characters in her life and quits the country (see figure 10m). Like the *femme fatale* in the majority of noir films, Zaitun remains committed to her autonomy and she does not allow herself to be converted by the hero or captured by the police. Zaitun refuses to be defined by Amran who repeatedly announces that he will take care of her or submit her sexuality to the male-dominated institution of the family provided by Ibrahim who announces that he 'is king'. Instead, she defines herself and resists all efforts by both Ibrahim and Amran to 'put her in her place' (Place, 1978). Although the film depicts Zaitun as dangerous and worthy of destruction, her character is clearly a representation of women who are confined by the roles traditionally open to them – their destructive struggle for independence is a response to the restrictions that men place on them.

*Figure 10m*



Mainstream Malay cinema normally presents unconventionally independent women as dangerous and irrational from the perspective of the patriarchal society. The depiction of how women should conduct themselves, the images of conventional women and the examples of happy marriages are often formulaic and uninteresting. It is the image of the powerful, fearless, and independent *femme fatale* that tends to be memorable perhaps because she remains true to her destructive nature and refuses to be converted or captured, even if it means that she must die. The palpable feminist element of *Buai Laju-Laju* therefore is that Zaitun represents independent and powerful femininity, somewhat similar to the idea of the 'new woman' who evokes fear and a legitimisation of masculine desire to maintain control over the strong sexual woman. Her portrayal offers the pleasure of seeing women who are deadly but

sexy, exciting and strong, but that could only exist in art house or indie films rather than in conventional cinema where they would be destroyed. Ultimately, as the heroine, Zaitun's character is unlike Gledhill's independent woman in the sense that she is never the victim. Instead, Zaitun triumphs as the ultimate liberated Malay heroine who rejects the conventional role of devoted wife and mother that mainstream Malay society prescribes for women.

### ***Black Widow-Wajah Ayu (1994)***

*Black Widow-Wajah Ayu*<sup>123</sup>, also directed by U-Wei Hj Saari, is adapted from the novel by Raja Azmi<sup>124</sup> and further exemplifies the notion that in mainstream Malay cinematic tradition narrative resolutions rarely recuperates the subversive significance of the sexually deviant woman but instead punishes her in a melodramatic fashion. This film presents the lead female protagonist as essentially a 'good' character but one who violates Malay-Muslim norms by engaging in sexual activity, even though she is not portrayed as a prostitute or manipulator who exchanges sexual favours for personal gain. The heroine, Masayu (Ayu), is depicted as a modern, independent woman, as illustrated in her choice of profession and lifestyle<sup>125</sup>, and in her financial as well as sexual independence. Her character is depicted in the manner of the stereotyped image of the modern Malay woman in films of the 1990s, usually clad in Western-style clothing but wears the *baju kurung* when in the *kampung*. The film draws attention to Ayu's modern attitude and way of life through the figure-hugging and sometimes revealing (by Malay-Muslim standards) Western outfits that accentuate her physical attractiveness. Her demeanour is also portrayed as alluring to the male characters that she meets – her high-school boyfriend Murad, the high-school teacher Mr Ng who offers extra tuition, the rich film producer, her ex-boyfriend Asri, the love interest Imran and his photographer brother Jalil who becomes her husband.

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<sup>123</sup> The film is not a direct take of the novel. The novel contains graphic sexual scenes that are not projected onto the film version as these would have been heavily censored. The film itself underwent many cuts by the Censorship board before its release.

<sup>124</sup> Women writers like Raja Azmi, who produced this film, have been able to openly raise the issue of sexuality in the realm of Malaysian literature as they have not experienced strict censorship like their counterparts in the film sector (Khoo, 2006, p. 149). Raja Azmi's recent cinematic attempt at highlighting the issue of homosexuality and transsexualism in '*... Dalam Botol*' ('...in a Bottle') with its brave plot has also courted some controversy.

<sup>125</sup> Ayu's profession points to a controversial but popular notion in some quarters of Malay society, particularly amongst the upper and middle classes: Malaysian Airlines (MAS) stewardesses are attractive women who choose this profession to enjoy the travel perks of the job and to snare a rich husband (the film suggests this notion through Asri's remarks on Ayu's penchant for dating various men like the older film producer). This is a result of various sex scandal stories that have been circulated through the press rumour mill by MAS cabin crew themselves.

The film, nevertheless, seems ambiguous in its projection of Ayu's character as an immoral woman. This is because Ayu is presented as friendly, generous, hardworking and respectful to others, both young and old. Ayu's independent woman persona is established from the onset of the film in which she is instantaneously portrayed as the sexually active Malay woman who appears to have no qualms about sleeping with a boyfriend unlike the majority of the virtuous heroines discussed thus far. This image is established through the opening scene which features a gliding shot of Ayu in bed covered only in white bed sheets to illustrate her sexuality. Her desires are again suggested when Imran secretly visits her bedroom at his parents' house. The scene sees Ayu sitting in a sexy manner; her dress slit exposing her leg, and asking: 'you don't think we will be caught' (see figure 10n). The depiction of Ayu's relationship with both Imran and Jalil does not present a solid image of her as a manipulator of men. Instead, this element in the plot appears more like a love triangle. Ayu seems to care for both brothers and fails to clarify her true feelings before Jalil beats Imran to the post of proposing marriage to Ayu who yields to her mother's reasoning on how the sanctity of marriage would end any 'bad luck' that Ayu has been experiencing.

Figure 10n



The film contrasts tradition and modernity through the *kampung*-city binary, which also parallels Ayu's activities. When Ayu is away from her village she is free to socialise with men like film producer Ahmad, and brothers Imran and Jalil, as well as pursue leisure activities that form the perks of her job as stewardess. Her visits to the *kampung*, however, are mainly for the purpose of spending time with her mother Aton, and for being involved in the building of the medical clinic. With the exception of Ayu who is seen pursuing modern activities like travelling and outings with friends and boyfriends, the other women featured in the film are seen carrying out traditional female domestic duties – preparation for cooking, cleaning, and mothering. The traditional attitude to a woman's role is also conveyed through Aton's belief in a 'curse' that has befallen Ayu as a result of Aton's own transgression in her youth. This is illustrated in Aton's visits to the *bomoh* (traditional healer) for advice on how to protect Ayu from bad luck and how to increase Ayu's potential for marriage and make her more 'attractive' for such purposes. Aton also champions the traditional matrimonial path

believing that it would relieve Ayu of any ill-fortune that may have attached itself to her because of Aton's previous misdemeanour, unaware of her daughter's sexual activity. The image of Ayu undergoing the *mandi bunga* ritual<sup>126</sup> (floral bath) with the help of Aton underpins the cultural tenets that Malay women are fixed to. The shot of the full moon in this scene also points to traditional Malay belief that connects the moon's cycle to women<sup>127</sup> and their menstrual cycle – the visual reference to the full moon also possibly alluding to Ayu's fertility and desires, or the generational cycle that both women are trapped in.

The juxtaposition of city and village, and therefore tradition and modernity, is also illustrated in the parallel stories of Ayu and Aton, in their depiction as fallen women. The film contrasts Ayu and Aton against the other female characters in the narrative who are portrayed in the traditional capacity of wife and mother. Unlike Shida, her best friend from school who has settled into domestic life, Ayu (in the first two episodes of the film) is still enjoying outings with men and takes pleasure in the perks of her job. The film uses flashback scenes to explain the characteristics and motivation of both mother and daughter and to gradually unveil Aton's story, hence contributing to the disclosure of her past as well as Ayu's background in a manner that is reminiscent of Malay melodrama. In the novel, the female protagonist is raped by her fiancé Murad and decides to 'break the hearts' of the men that she consequently engages in a relationship with, thus connecting her to the 'black widow' phenomenon. In the film, however, Ayu is also raped by her high-school beau Murad but it is unclear as to whether her partiality for casual relationships with various men is a result of this bad experience.

Ayu's character parallels that of her mother by virtue of their sexual transgression, which later leads to the birth of an illegitimate child. Both women also harbour feelings for a man while being married to another. The difference in their stories lies in the setting that these women live in. Aton is a young woman in a seemingly 1950s-1960s traditional *kampung* setting in which her liaison with Agus triggers such great shame that it leads to the death of her father and her husband, and to her belief that the curse attached to the adult Ayu is divine

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<sup>126</sup> The *mandi bunga* ritual is a traditional Malay, Chinese and Indian cleansing practice to protect against evil spirits and illnesses and to bring about good fortune. The manner in which it is conducted, as well as the ingredients used in the bath, differs according to ethnic groups. Many Malays have amalgamated this practice with their religious faith. Conservative Islamic proponents believe that this ritual goes against the tenet of *qada'* and *qadar* which pertains to the submission of one's fate into God's (Allah's) design i.e. Muslims should pray and submit to the will of Allah rather than engage in mystical un-Islamic custom.

<sup>127</sup> Malay men traditionally likened the ideal woman's beauty to a full moon: '*wajah bersinar bak bulan purnama*' - literally 'the visage radiates beauty like a full moon', as suggested in conventional old Malay songs and poems.



*Figure 10o*

punishment for her mistake. The depiction of Aton's character exemplifies the archetypal traditional role of daughter, and later wife, who is subjected to the dictates of the male head of the family. Aton's character parallels that of Ayu in that both are brought up by single parents<sup>128</sup> but the absence of a mother in Aton's life suggests that she lacks the maternal role model that would have presumably been a nurturing source of comfort. The stringent rules of her father exemplify the confining patriarchal atmosphere of the *kampung* in which arranged marriages are approved and a young woman engaging in a liaison with a transient such as Agus would be scandalous. The scandal involving Aton and Agus is also etched in the memory of the *kampung* folk in present times (see figure 10o). Some of the men in the present *kampung* play the villains in the story and represent patriarchal aversion to the threat of the independent woman who infiltrates and commandeers what is essentially, from their perspective, a patriarchal sphere. This is illustrated in the scene when Kassim and friends object to and vote against Ayu's financial contribution to the building plans and when they attempt to burn down the construction site.

The position of women (as wife, mother, and daughter) 'is so necessary to patriarchy' that the 'displacement' of women upsets the patriarchal system and provides a challenge to that worldview (Kaplan, 1980). In this film, patriarchy is represented by the likes of Aton's strict father and her husband Dollah in flashback scenes of the past but is given a more balanced representation in Ayu's time. Kassim uses the issue of Aton's past indiscretion, and therefore the circumstances surrounding Ayu's birth as the rationale for rejecting and destroying the building that would signify the power of the deviant woman. This attitude is also evident in the disapproving looks from some of the men when Ayu visits the construction site in shirt and trousers, masculine-like and holding the cards to progress in her village. However, there are more even-handed men in the village who are keen and supportive of Ayu's efforts, for example, Tok Empat and Murad. Imran's portrayal as the hero, however, is uninspiring as he is not seen to openly compete for Ayu's hand in marriage and resigns

<sup>128</sup> Aton's mother dies giving birth to her and her father reminds Aton of her mother when pointing out the importance of filial duty and maintaining both her and her father's virtuous and respectable reputation.



himself to the fact that Ayu chooses to marry Jalil. The weakness in his Imran's character allows the narrative to make Ayu a more sympathetic character.

The film uses the *mise en scène* and elements of melodrama to project the transgression of the two female protagonists. The gradual scanning of the framed photographs during the opening credits of the film, for instance, creates a sense of nostalgia that is sustained through the use of the flashback scenes of Aton's youth and which later contributes to revealing the tragic history in Ayu's family. Ayu's portrayal as the sexualised woman at the beginning of the film is also signified through the mirror shot of her applying bold, red lipstick, while the accidental shattering of the perfume bottle seems to foretell the tragic misfortune that is about to befall her lover and eventually transpires in her own demise. The appearance of the spider to attach the 'black widow' characteristics to Ayu's persona is also established in a rather melodramatic fashion. At the beginning of the film, Ayu is seen in bed asleep when a black spider appears in a surrealistic manner over her figure to suggest that she is perhaps dreaming of the creature. A spider is then seen spinning a web at the top of a balcony glass door that Ayu looks out of. Dramatically, soon after Ayu leaves, gangsters break into the hotel suite and one of them shoots her lover who is still lying in bed and kills him. The spider reappears in a dream-like sequence in which Ayu is lying in a pool of water while the spider crawls over the water (see figure 10p). Although the dream and the notion of a curse pricks her conscience whenever Aton insists that she visits the *bomoh*, Ayu continues with her modern lifestyle and dismisses any bad happenings linked to her as coincidental and as '*takdir*' (divine intervention). The only time the curse seems to affect Ayu is the morning after her wedding night when she awakes and watches Jalil to see if he is still alive.

Figure 10p



The film ends with a series of melodramatic moments reflecting the element of fate which is presented as a motif that is closely connected to the plight of both Aton and Ayu, and conveyed in the *bomoh*'s statement: 'life and death is in the hands of God'. Aton's revelation, in a flashback, of what occurs when she and Agus are discovered by her father and husband sees the narrative immediately taking a melodramatic turn in which her father instantly suffers a heart attack and dies. Her husband Dollah's shock is illustrated in the torture evident in his

facial expression, his instant silence towards Aton and refusal to partake in his conjugal duties, and in his denial of forgiveness to Agus. Dollah is soon afflicted with a mysterious illness and eventually dies, perhaps out of shame and a broken heart. Agus, deeply regretting his betrayal of Aton's father who had given him a job and a place to stay, leaves the village, wanders off aimlessly and is knocked down by a car and killed. The element of fate via the idea of God's will is again illustrated at the end when the heroine's character is not recuperated. The notion of redemption being possible for the fallen woman through heterosexual bonding or some form of atonement for her sins is only evident in Aton's portrayal as she continuously repents for her single act of transgression. Yet despite Aton's attempts at redemption – by being regularly involved in religious activities and by encouraging her (illegitimate) daughter to enter into the stability that marriage offers and to perform good deeds such as financing the building of the clinic – Ayu's own chain of sexual misdemeanour is still punished. Although the film presents Ayu as a pleasant character, as well as a kind and committed benefactor, the penalty for her transgression culminates when she dies giving birth to Imran's child. Imran, the other party in the forbidden liaison, is literally 'left holding the baby', who like her mother, is yet another illegitimate child. Ultimately, the film's exploration of the parallel connection in the actions of the mother and daughter reveal Malay-Muslim society's expectations and anxieties about sexuality. Although Aton and Ayu are 'good' women, they succumb to their female desire and commit adultery, and so the film reaffirms patriarchal values through the castigation of the deviant female who oversteps religious and cultural boundaries.

### ***Jalang* (2009)**

*Jalang* is yet another example of a cinematic attempt at presenting didactic moral values on the role of women and the responsibilities of a patriarchal society. The film failed to elicit good reviews owing to ineffective script, over-acting and lack of substance in its simplistic exploration of the woman's sexual agency. I have chosen to briefly examine *Jalang* as it is one of the more recent Malay films that specifically focus on the sexually deviant woman. My discussion will concentrate on some key moments pertaining to the construction of the heroine as a '*jalang*' (whore) and on how melodrama is used to project the film's stance on female sexual promiscuity.

The film begins with some background information and broad definitions of '*jalang*' in the opening credits. The filmmaker moralises on the theme of the film by stating that '*jalang meruntuhkan bangsa*' (literally 'prostitution [sexual transgression] wrecks a nation')

and by inserting the *Al Isra* verse<sup>129</sup> from the Quran as a reminder to Muslims on the sins of adultery. This note suggests the moralistic stance on adultery taken by the filmmaker from the onset of the film, somewhat like a disclaimer, particularly since the film is given an 18PL<sup>130</sup> certification by the Censorship Board on account of elements of violence and what would be considered as indecent scenes involving the female protagonist, Maria. The film offers a stark visual definition of the concept of '*jalang*' in its initial scene which shows some female items of clothing lying about in a luxury boat and a focused shot on Maria's shoulder, with a butterfly tattoo to one side, moving in a sexually suggestive way.

Figure 10q



Maria's initial motivation seems akin to that of Zaitun in *Buai Laju-Laju*, in the sense that the idea of '*jalang*' in this film is linked to the quest for a lavish and materialistic lifestyle. The narrative is mostly set in the surrounds of luxury apartments and a yachting resort on the island of Langkawi. Maria lives in a very comfortable apartment and drives a soft-top Mercedes Benz (see figure 10q) while the various businessmen she engages with live in large houses with ostentatious décor and conduct their transactions in plush hotels and modern office buildings. Other female characters like Ikram's mother and Puan Sri are seen in expensive, stylish clothing and accessories. Maria's portrayal as '*jalang*' corresponds with the independent woman persona in terms of her sexual autonomy and her lifestyle as a modern woman. This is conveyed through her physical appearance, as she is for the most part of the narrative in sexy, figure-hugging Western-style outfits which at times even reveal her cleavage. More significantly, Maria's playful demeanour and exaggerated mannerisms enhances her flirtatious persona when she is addressing various business clients. For instance, Maria tells Datuk Vincent over the telephone that she is 'available for him at all times' and makes seductive eye-contact with the businessmen she delivers a report to at the start of the narrative. The film conveys societal attitudes and perceptions on such deviant female

<sup>129</sup> This Quranic verse, when translated pertains to God (Allah) forbidding His servants to commit *Zina* (unlawful sex) or to approach it or to do anything that may lead to it.

<sup>130</sup> 18PL (PL stands for '*pelbagai*' or 'various') – the film may contain strong violence, gore, horror/terror, sex scenes, nudity, sexual dialogues/references, religious, social or political issues that some people may find objectionable.

characters through Ikram's mother who criticises libertinism amongst the younger generation in her discussion with Ikram's father.

The film does not, however, fully explore the reasons behind Maria's transgression and so the depiction of her character as the victim of her own folly is only clear when she regrets her mistakes and seeks solace and refuge in her village. The only picture given of Maria's background is through Ikram's description of her as his unassuming and ordinary girlfriend at college. At the same time, Maria is also portrayed as the caring and loving older sister who gives advice to Mira on the importance of education, health and managing finances, provides pocket money and helps to prevent Mira from drug addiction. As their parents have passed away, Maria appears to assume both the maternal and paternal role in their relationship. With the exception of the aunt figure in Maria's village, the absence of familial guidance and support, as depicted in films like *Ringgit Kasorrga* and *Buai Laju-Laju*, is again a palpable in the depiction of these female characters who lose their moral bearings and succumb to the temptations that a materialistic life offers.

Unlike the binary depictions of the good versus bad woman in much of Malay cinema prior to the new millennium, the illustration of the '*jalang*' persona is only presented through the focus on Maria's character. The other female characters in the film, apart from Ikram's mother and Maria's aunt who lend a brief maternal tone to the narrative, do not provide a measurable contrast to accentuate the flaws in Maria's character. College student Mira associates with other drug addicts and Puan Sri is portrayed as the bitter, materialistic and vengeful wife whose own questionable morals are exposed when she engages in a sexual liaison with Zul, who provides her with information on Maria and Tan Sri's 'secret rendezvous', hence making her a '*jalang*' too. The appearance of romantic love, in the form of Maria's relationship with Ikram, however, acts as a turning point for Maria to reconsider her sexual *faux pas*, as illustrated in her conversations with Ben and her dramatic outburst in his office when she calls herself a '*pelacur*' (prostitute). The melodramatic mode is evident in the depiction of Maria's remorse when her past is revealed to Ikram, as illustrated when she laments her circumstances in her apartment; when she appreciates the natural environment and greenery of her village, away from luxurious bricks-and-mortar of the town; and when she (like Ayu in *Black Widow*) experiences the *mandi bunga* ritual as a way of cleansing her physical and spiritual self of any impurities resulting from her transgression (see figure 10r).

The portrayal of the male characters in the film further contributes to the idea and construction of '*jalang*' characteristics. The Malay businessmen, particularly those with honorific titles such as 'Datuk' and 'Tan Sri' are depicted as hypocritical, lecherous men who

*Figure 10r*

take advantage of Maria's willingness to offer sexual pleasure and use her as a commodity to negotiate with their clients or business partners in order to obtain successful and profitable business deals. The character of Ali, the mentally disturbed thug hired by Puan Sri to follow Maria and determine her relationship with Tan Sri, appears to function only as a narrative tool that contributes to the tragic end for the heroine. His psychological condition is only explained when he visits the doctor to discuss his abusive mother. Ali's story is not explored as he only seems to serve as the monster-like figure who 'hates all women', as conveyed through his over-dramatic facial and verbal expressions when he attacks the doctor while visualising her as Maria, and when he unleashes his sexual frustration and psychotic urge by violently raping and assaulting Maria near the film's end (see figure 10s).

*Figure 10s*

Patriarchal rejection of the sexually active woman is evident in several excessive scenes: Ikram's father, who himself has used Maria on several occasions, reveals the truth about Maria's activities by presenting Ikram with various men who have benefited from a casual business related tryst with her; Ikram is shocked and unable to come to terms with Maria's misdemeanour, as seen when he spits, curses Maria and hits her with a hard cushion in her apartment and places his foot on her prostrate body as if about to kick her before renouncing his ties; the deranged Ali violently attacks Maria and claims that it is punishment for her actions. Such scenes expose the egotistical and hypocritical morality of Malay men who associate virtuousness with virginity and therefore would not opt to marry a woman with an illustrious sexual history. The film, nevertheless, uses the portrayal of Ben Adam's character to present its didactic message and solution for such transgressive female characters as Maria. Throughout the film, Ben is the kind and patient friend who always provides help

and concern for Maria's well-being, out of sincerity and love for her. His good-natured and obliging personality is evident in the scene showing his meeting with a Russian woman whose husband has encountered problems with the Malaysian immigration authorities. He chauffeurs Maria to her evening rendezvous with various men and helps locate Maria's sister Mira and deals with the violent drug peddler who gets violent with Mira and her friends when they fail to produce correct payment. The portrayal of Ben's acceptance and love for Maria in spite of her tarnished reputation is the film's way of showing the forgiving aspect of Islam and the merciful side to Malay society for individuals keen on repentance and redemption. Ben also seeks Maria out in her village, expresses his devotion to her, and later presents her with a *telekung* (female Muslim prayer costume) as an invitation to repentance and to a new, virtuous life. He never gives up on Maria as illustrated in the final scene which sees him at the steps of the mosque awaiting Maria's appearance. The concept of forgiveness and welcome that is portrayed through Ben's character is echoed at the end with the focus on the image of the open door to the mosque which reveals another open door into the prayer hall as if indicating the route to redemption.

Figure 10t



As in most Malay films which feature the sexually immoral woman, the film ends with Maria's character being killed off in a melodramatic manner, from the point of Ali's onslaught on Maria to the lengthy, over dramatic scene showing the critically injured Maria's attempts at dragging herself to the mosque, clad in a white *baju kurung* as a sign of her claim to purity and holding on to the *telekung*, and by extension, the love and acceptance shown by Ben. The shot of Maria unexpectedly spouting blood is an excessively melodramatic moment that finalises the inevitable tragedy for her and for Ben (see figure 10t). The film's portrayal of Maria also suggests that the independent woman's success in a male dominated corporate environment results from the use of her sexual assets and her moral deficiency rather than her qualifications, intelligence and flair for clinching business deals. This idea is enhanced by the absence of other female protagonists who are successful in the workplace (like some of the urban and romantic heroines discussed in previous film analysis chapters) that could have

been juxtaposed against Maria's character. In the final analysis, unlike the more successful films by U-Wei which examine the issue of female sexual desire in a more complex and versatile fashion, *Jalang* seems more a straightforward, unsophisticated illustration of the filmmaker's moralising agenda as offered at the opening credits. Although Maria's character is recuperated from the point at which she expresses her desire and willingness for *taubat nasuha*<sup>131</sup> (repentance) and takes steps in this direction, the film still posits a tragedy at the end as if to suggest that a deviant female character like Maria would by no means be rid of disgrace and humiliation irregardless of her redeeming actions. The male protagonists who contribute to the degeneration of Maria's character, however, seem to escape unharmed.

What is commonly shared by the films discussed in this chapter is that the portrayal of the female protagonists corresponds with the idea of the excesses of female sexuality attributed to the fallen woman in both Western and Asian cinematic traditions. The film's expression of the sexuality of each heroine signifies her agency and the utilisation of narrative punishment is in keeping with the style of classic Malay cinema that has always presented the chastisement of highly sexualised women for their moral and sexual transgressions. This didactic element, customary in melodrama, begs the question of whether the films present a warning to Malay women that opposing patriarchal boundaries is detrimental and that the patriarchal structures that empower men will always re-establish their hegemonic control.

If perceived according to the melodramatic tradition, these films suggest that, ultimately, the patriarchal pattern will be restored, whether through the lost woman being brought back in line, or eliminated. Many a fallen woman, having demonstrated female independence and an ability to survive alone despite the misfortune they have had to bear, offers too much of a threat to the patriarchal norm to be permitted to carry on living. The death of the deviant female protagonist also marks the control over female sexuality which is ultimately an effort to strengthen male authority, reinforce gender boundaries, and ensure the cultural survival of the Malay community undergoing rapid modernisation. However, although the films discussed illustrate a clear acceptance of the Malay cinematic tradition of punishing the bad woman, the ambivalent portrayals of the female protagonists allows space for female sexuality and desire in an otherwise conservative and conventionally patriarchal film setting. The portrayal of characters like Meera, Zaleha, and Zaitun who are more complex allows the respective films more negotiation with the feminine images when compared to the more stark and stereotyped women in *Black Widow* and *Jalang*. Like many

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<sup>131</sup> According to Islamic principles, *taubat nasuha* ('*taubat*' is literally repent) is the most absolute and purest form of repentance.

classic Hollywood film noir and melodramas, the pleasures offered by films like the ones discussed here are those of transgression. It is because the female protagonists trigger disorder that they are fascinating and worthy of attention.

Competing images of Malay women are key elements in the social construction of modern Malaysian society. In the grand scheme of things, these films imply that gender differentiation is not only expressed in terms of biological differences but more significantly in terms of morality. When these films are compared, however, the idea that emerges seems to be that as long as Malay women are uneducated and are confined to the traditional *kampung* milieu, men's superiority could remain unchallenged. This contrasts with the young women living in the city who earn money and possess the social freedom to experiment with a newly awakened sense of self. These female protagonists represent Malay women who come to define themselves through work experiences and market choices, and are not materially or even morally dependent on parents and relatives, primarily male ones. Most of the films, nevertheless, clearly suggest that young Malay women bear special moral burdens for realising the image of a modern Malay society. They are defined by male figures or the wider patriarchal society they find themselves in. Despite attempting to assert their sexual agency, melodramatic elements are used in the films to reveal that they are ultimately thwarted by fate or patriarchal forces, in order for societal balance to be restored. Although Malay cinema shows signs of becoming less conservative than might be expected, the emphasis on sexuality in relation to the female protagonist seems to bring forth the most extreme melodramatic moments and endings and any negotiation (in Gledhill's terms), therefore, seems impossible.



## Chapter 7

### NEGOTIATING FEMALE PROTAGONISTS AND THE MELODRAMATIC MODE

The intention of this research has been to analyse the melodramatic mode in the depiction of female protagonists in selected Malay films from the early 1990s to 2009. In order to achieve this objective, I have organised a review of critical responses and opinions on the subject of melodrama and feminist film criticism that informs my conceptual framework. A brief contextual account of the socio-economic and cultural scenario relevant to Malaysian cinema has also been outlined to elucidate the culturally constructed positions of the female protagonists discussed. I have described the methodology which combines Western concepts on melodrama with traditional Malaysian melodramatic influences for the analyses of the films. I have presented an analyses of female protagonists in relation to specific themes emerging from respective films and demonstrated that ideas in Gledhill's 'Pleasurable Negotiations' (1988) are generally relevant to the construction of the woman as an independent persona and/or victim. Analysis of the films has established a typology of female protagonists that hopefully suggests a means of understanding the depiction of Malay heroines in films of the 1990s and the new millennium. Textual analyses of the films have highlighted melodramatic elements (identified in the methodology) used in the depiction of various themes and moments in which the portrayal of a female character is augmented through melodrama. In this chapter, therefore, I highlight and summarise the more prominent findings that have emerged from the film analyses and present my final thoughts on this research.

Both Western and Malaysian concepts on melodrama and female representation are indeed applicable as a basic take-off point in analysing films from the stipulated time frame. When compared to female representation in Malay melodramas prior to the 1990s, however, the depiction of female protagonists and the thematic construction in the selected films reveal nuances that illustrate the complexities and shifting socio-cultural patterns in Malaysia. On the whole, the thesis has demonstrated that the suggested typology of female protagonists is viable and that it maintains the notion of female power within the sphere of vocational autonomy, romantic associations, and sexual agency. This typology of heroines does not exist separately but in a continuum on account of their independent personas and by virtue of other

shared characteristics depicting female independence and skill within the respective thematic landscape. What has also emerged from the melodrama evident in the films is the transformation of traditional female roles as the heroines engage in a range of conventionally 'masculine' traits, abilities and privileges. The reconstruction of gender relations evident in these films clearly point to changing attitudes towards gender, subjectivity and the woman's position beyond the domestic realm.

### **A Typology of Heroines**

Employing this eclectic method in analysing the selected films has been valuable in helping me to arrive at the following conclusions. For the most part, the portrayal of heroines as independent personas provides the film text with narrative credibility as the heroine's role and depiction is recognisable in terms of contemporary socio-cultural definitions of women. The independent female protagonist displays agency which, as Gledhill suggests, points towards the struggles of real women. The female characters in these Malay films 'negotiate' their way through changes in society as a result of suppression, modernity, or religious experiences and, therefore, cannot be fixed in their patriarchal value. This notion is evident, for example, in the case of the modern career women such as Mastura in *Selubung*; Ena in *Layar Lara*; Orked in *Gubra*; Dian in *Cinta*; Nina in *Ringgit Kasorrga*; and Mas Ayu in *Black Widow*, as well as other representations of the modern women illustrated in the portrayals of Ani in *Muallaf*; Jo, Milya and Atikah in *Anak Halal*; and Putri and Shasha in *Gol & Gincu*. These female protagonists pursue modern accomplishments and negotiate the conflicts posed by modernity and patriarchy while still retaining familial ties or values. Also evident is the *penawar* (antidote) figure, portrayed as the virtuous, good-natured, and virginal woman in the form the ideal love-interest or an affectionate, supportive and sacrificing mother or wife. Their portrayals are representations of identifiable, contemporary female constructs as illustrated, for instance, in the portrayals of Mastura and Nina in *Selubung* and *Ringgit Kasorrga* respectively; Orked and her mother Inom in *Sepet*; Putri and Datin Aina in *Gol & Gincu*; Rubiah in *Cinta*; and Marya and Imaan in *Sepi*.

Some of these heroines simultaneously function as allegories of specific issues and contribute to the strong didactic nature of a storyline. This is especially clear, for example, in the portrayals of Orked as an ideal representative of multicultural Malaysia in *Sepet* and *Gubra*, as well as Zaleha and Zaitun respectively as representations of the consequence of female sexuality to the male psyche in U-Wei's films. Films portraying such female protagonists in urban/modern settings, however, seemingly allow a higher level of agency and

independence to the female protagonists. In that respect these heroines have progressed from those of old Malay cinema and *bangsawan* which did not present a positive portrayal of assertive female characters. Heroines such as Zaleha in *Perempuan, Isteri &...*, Zaitun in *Buai Laju-Laju*, and Gusti Putri in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, however, whose portrayals highlight the issues of class and temporal differences, seem to be posed with more powerful and apparent male control.

The typology of heroines corresponds with the notion that the woman in melodrama is defined through her portrayal as victim. Nevertheless, this thesis reveals a more complex depiction of the Malay heroine as the notion of the victim is problematised by the heroine's independent persona. Gledhill (1988) submits that the female character becomes a victim or tragic figure in the melodramatic context as a result of suppression or self-sacrifice that leads to the loss of her agency. This notion is evident in the depiction of most of the heroines who are seen to experience repression at various points in the respective narratives. The versatile nature of their portrayals, however, creates a space for their assertiveness which allows them to negotiate their way with the aim of obtaining truths and fulfilment. All the heroines, by virtue of gender and setting, are also victims because they are expressions of the male psyche or are the reflection of moral (patriarchal) values. The portrayal of ultimate victims or tragic figures, however, seems more significant in the portrayals (and punishment) of women who transgress, specifically Zaleha in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*; Meera in *Ringgit Kasorrga*; Mas Ayu in *Black Widow*; Maria in *Jalang*; Temah and Kiah in *Gubra*; and Atikah in *Anak Halal*. The portrayals of Auntie Zai (*Layar Lara*) and Bayan (*Puteri Gunung Ledang*) also correspond with the notion of the tragic figure but on a less significant scale as they are portrayed more as maternal figures who are victims of circumstance rather than of personal action. Gusti Putri in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, however, is the most powerful tragic figure on account of the conflict posed by both circumstance (cultural backdrop) and by her individual actions. Her character fittingly exists as a legend and in a historical setting to allow for fearless female defiance and confrontation of patriarchal structures as well as a punishment that, on a cinematic level, surpasses death.

By and large, the heroine who occupies the role of the victim at some point in the narrative functions as a character or structure that stimulates the plot and her point of view usually dominates the narrative. This idea, however, is not as precise in films such as *Anak Halal*, *Cinta*, *Sepi*, and *Buai Laju-Laju*, as while the main female protagonists strongly contribute to the course of the narrative the perspective appears to favour that of the hero/male protagonist. As illustrated in the analyses of these films, the female protagonist still

corresponds with the notion of the independent woman and/or victim structure and helps to reflect a particular theme but further augments the depiction of the male protagonist. For instance, Inderaputera's portrayal and the modernity theme is enhanced through his relationship with Jo and Atikah in *Anak Halal*; various sub-plots in *Cinta* and *Sepi* focus on male protagonists like Harris and Adam, respectively, whose story and character is defined by their relationships with female protagonists who contribute to the love theme; Zaitun's portrayal in *Buai Laju-Laju* further enhances Amran's complex character even when she is a focus of the narrative highlighting the sexual manipulation motif.

The romantic heroines in the typology share a similar facet in the depiction of their relationships and desire. These heroines are specifically faced with obstacles that challenge or threaten the romantic union (a traditional characteristic of love stories according to Doane, 1987)) which simultaneously augment their dilemma and enhance their ability to negotiate conflicts that lead to either the fulfilment of love or a tragic/ heartbreaking outcome. Female desire (another essential component of love stories) also does not seem to be given an overt visual depiction. The apparent indicators of 'chemistry' or physical attraction in these films are mostly expressed through looks and eye contact between the heroine and the desired male character. This is particularly evident, for example, in Orked and Jason's first encounter in *Sepet*; in Gusti Putri and Tuah's reunion on Mount Ledang in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*; in the manner in which Putri looks at Eddy and later Reza in *Gol & Gincu*; and in Imaan's visualisation of Khalil in *Sepi*. The notion that female desire is expressed through the eyes is also apparent in the portrayal of the urban and sexual heroines as seen, for instance, in the way that both Jo and Atikah look at Inderaputera in *Anak Halal*; in Maz and Li's affectionate exchanges in *Gubra*; in the interaction between Mas Ayu and Imran, and Eton and Agus in *Black Widow*; and in the initial meeting of Zaitun and Amran in *Buai Laju-Laju*. In keeping with Doane's theory on the love story, these heroines also share the experience of waiting and separation which still indicates a 'desiring subjectivity' in their portrayal even when the heroine's desire appears passive. This is clearly illustrated, for example, when Gusti Putri laments and pines for Tuah in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*; when Orked is heartbroken upon reading Jason's letter in *Sepet*; when Arianna waits for news on Khalif in *Cinta*; and when Marya learns that she is pregnant and is torn between her husband and Sufi in *Sepi*.

The typology in turn suggests that the treatment of the sexual woman to some extent corresponds with Malay cinematic traditions as well as Hollywood film noir and melodrama of the 1950s. As demonstrated in the final film analysis chapter, the female protagonist who exhibits and acts upon female desire that goes beyond the confines of marriage is significantly

portrayed as a problematic character. These heroines deviate from religious and cultural norms and their punishment (death) functions as a sociological rescue that forms as warning or advice, showing what happens to the woman who deviates from patriarchal conventions. With the exception of Zaitun in *Buai Laju-Laju*, which is stylistically based on the film noir, the female protagonists who transgress are not portrayed as inherently corrupt as suggested by the melodrama reflecting the films' sympathetic attitude towards the plight of these characters. Zaleha in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*, for example, is victimised and rejected by the male figure who could recuperate her social (and moral) status; Meera in *Ringgit Kasorrga* displays moments of conflict and regret over her dealings with the women at Blaze; Ayu and Eton in *Black Widow* attempt to redeem their sexual misdemeanour by contributing to the development of their village; Maria in *Jalang* is a caring sister who undertakes concrete steps towards repentance and is loved by the virtuous hero.

In *Buai Laju-Laju*, however, Zaitun's portrayal as the *femme fatale* partly corresponds with Doane's (1987) suggestion that the problem with excessive female sexuality is that it refuses the stability and security of place and social position. The wifely role that Ibrahim provides Zaitun within the isolated setting of their village, and the love and excitement that Amran offers proves insufficient for Zaitun's single-minded and self-centred, materialistic ambitions. As suggested in the film discussion, U-Wei departs from the traditional construction of the *femme fatale* in film noir and the sexual figure in melodrama to allow this heroine the utmost ability to negotiate her objectives and triumph over patriarchal dictates. The respective portrayals of Zaitun, as well as Zaleha and Meera, establishes the idea that although there were more varied types of negative female representation in Malay films of the 1950s – in the form of the wicked stepmother, mother-in-law or jealous love rival, for instance – the portrayal of the *racun* (poison) female character from the 1990s onwards is still more inclined towards the highly sexualised and materialistic woman. The mutual practice between classic and contemporary Malay films, therefore, indicates that female protagonists who transgress are predisposed to the material attractions offered by modernity.

And finally, Gledhill's idea that the heroine functions as the 'upholder of truth' while conforming to the demands of melodrama is also relevant to the typology of heroines. The actions of the female characters (who are portrayed as victims of any kind of danger or patriarchal disapproval and opposition) lead to the recognition of various truths in relation to the position of women in society, and in gender/class/ethnic relations. This is particularly evident in the depictions of heroines whose portrayal reflect the themes of, for example, patriarchal-imposed religious ideology in *Selubung*; interracial relations in *Sepet* and *Gubra*;

female assertiveness and liberalism in *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and *Gol & Gincu* respectively; female desire and sexual agency in *Buai Laju-Laju* and *Black Widow*; and exploitation in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*, *Ringgit Kasorrnga*, and *Jalang*. The autonomy demonstrated by these independent heroines' resistance against patriarchal domination and the struggle to highlight and maintain 'truths', thus, problematises their melodramatic construction as victim. The duality (independence/victim) that exists in the heroines culminates in either liberation (as in the case of Mastura in *Selubung*; Ena in *Layar Lara*, Ani in *Muallaf*; Orked in *Sepet*; Putri in *Gol & Gincu*; Rubiah and Arianna in *Cinta*; Imaan in *Sepi*; Nina in *Ringgit Kasorrnga*; and Zaitun in *Buai Laju-Laju*) or suppression i.e. passive existence or death (as in the case of Orked in *Gubra*; Jo and Atikah in *Anak Halal*; Gusti Putri in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*; Dian in *Cinta*; Marya in *Sepi*; Zaleha in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*; Meera in *Ringgit Kasorrnga*; Mas Ayu in *Black Widow*; and Maria in *Jalang*).

### **The Melodramatic Plot and Emotion**

In general, the plot in the films deal with contemporary life, often focusing on conflicts in negotiating family, relationships, and patriarchy as a crisis for the protagonist who may or may not succeed in this endeavour. The female protagonists are portrayed as being at the mercy of social conventions and the plot traces the ultimate acceptance or rejection of these principals within the confines of social and familial traditions.

Barely a handful of the films, such as *Anak Halal*, *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*, *Ringgit Kasorrnga*, and *Jalang*, convey a clear depiction of good versus evil through the portrayal of virtuous and villainous characters reflecting the Manichean universe, and illustrating the influence of *bangsawan*, Indian cinema, and classic Hollywood films. On the whole, the 'good' characters in most of the films are seen negotiating and regaining power through a more complex and stimulating plot structure. This contrasts to the more undemanding storylines such as the ones in *Black Widow*, *Jalang*, and some of the sub-plots in *Cinta* and in *Sepi* which present the narrative resolution through a basic plot structure and through crude, unsophisticated handling of the melodramatic mode. Most of the more sophisticated narratives also do not end with a return to the initial pre-conflict and dilemma setting, as it would have in a conventional melodrama, as demonstrated in *Gubra*, *Anak Halal*, *Sepet*, and *Perempuan, Isteri & ...* for example. Films focusing on the urban and the sexual woman, additionally, contain plots that are more didactic in nature particularly in relation to encouraging positive family relationships and tolerance, observing a balance of modern and traditional practices, and rejecting transgressions and misdemeanours.

The 'villain' or the reason for conflict is usually connected to patriarchy and male oppression. At the same time, like the melodramas prior to the 1990s, these films also feature a combination of active and passive male protagonists who augment the portrayal of the heroine's assertiveness. The films portray a selection of cruel, loathsome, powerful and hyper-masculine male characters who clearly represent a criticism of patriarchal tenets that are entrenched in cultural expectations of Malay-Muslim masculinity. Their depictions illustrate the male ego and point to the moral corruption and abuse of power exerted by men to compensate for their feeble self-esteem through the repression of women. Some of the more memorable examples are Brother Musa in *Selubung*, Ani and Ana's father in *Muallaf*, the Sultan in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, Eddy in *Gol & Gincu*, Amir in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*, Datuk Shah in *Ringgit Kasorrga*, and the psychotic Ali in *Jalang*. The depiction of these male characters are, nevertheless, balanced by the more desirable heroes such as Malik in *Layar Lara*, Brian in *Muallaf*, Inderaputera in *Anak Halal*, Jason in *Sepet*, Tuah in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, Reza in *Gol & Gincu*, Mukhsin in *Mukhsin*, and Ben Adam in *Jalang*. These relatively noble male protagonists, however, are essentially flawed, appear less fervent, or lack machismo and these traits contribute to the complexity of the narrative and further augment the strength of the heroine's predicament and characterisation. Unlike traditional melodramas, wickedness and immorality on the male protagonist's part are, furthermore, not penalised, particularly in films focusing on the sexual woman like *Jalang* and *Ringgit Kasorrga* for instance. As a result, if the heroine does not meet a tragic end, her world does not seem to be fully restored back to what it was prior to the chain of events that caused conflict or misfortune, as in the case of Nina in *Ringgit Kasorrga* and Zaitun in *Buai Laju-Laju*, but is instead re-established as a crisis-free environment.

The family, although usually depicted in the background, appears to be a significant element in the films in terms of its role as the source of conflict but also as the solution, echoing the idea that the narrative solution 'almost inevitably functions to preserve and perpetuate the institution of the family and the society built upon it' (Byars, 1991, p. 100). Conflicts rooted within the family are, for instance, illustrated in the plots of *Muallaf*, *Anak Halal*, and *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, while positive depictions are evident in all of Yasmin Ahmad's films (*Sepet*, *Gubra*, *Mukhsin*, *Muallaf*), in *Gol & Gincu*, and in *Ringgit Kasorrga* (Nina's family) – these domestic relationships contribute to the didactic tone on the value of family relations. The absence of family, however, is largely substituted by other characters who assume and project maternal-like qualities, such as Auntie Zai in *Layar Lara*, Mariam and Jo in *Anak Halal*, Bayan in *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, and Ani in *Muallaf*. Characters such

as Zaleha in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*, Meera in *Ringgit Kasorrga*, Zaitun in *Buai Laju-Laju*, and Maria in *Jalang*, who abscond from or are short of any family ties, however, are portrayed as women who significantly suffer from the loss of their moral compass. Even when a male protagonist/hero is accessible as a means toward negotiating recuperation, as in the portrayal of Khal in *Ringgit Kasorrga*, and Ben in *Jalang*, the plot intervenes with a tragedy as if suggesting that male characters (not fathers or brothers) are not ascribed with the capacity to restore the woman's position.

The melodramatic effect in these films appears to be strongly and frequently conveyed through the elements of music and songs, setting, as well as pathos and excess in relation to fate (*takdir*). By and large, these elements are employed to generate emotion and sympathy for the various 'good' characters, as well as to enhance a motif in the narrative structure. Melodrama is often defined as a dramatic narrative because of the musical accompaniment which indicates the emotional effects and this is particularly apparent in films focusing on the romantic heroine. *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, for instance, demonstrate Yasmin Ahmad's affinity for using a variety of music selection to punctuate key sentimental moments and to reflect a multicultural sensibility. *Gol & Gincu*, *Cinta* and *Sepi*, all utilise upbeat pop songs and sentimental ballads to accentuate the poignant effect of various scenes reflecting both happiness and misery. The choice of instrumental pieces and pop ballads clearly offers a promise of fantasy and desire, if not its fulfilment, and therefore plays a significant role in accentuating the melodramatic emotion that is attached to a tormented character or to moments depicting sadness, humour, or joy. The music component in films focusing on the urban and sexual heroines also provides passive and emotional support to the films' visual and thematic presentation. The pop ballads in Shuhaimi Baba's films, for example, are related to specific motifs such as the plight of the Palestinian refugees in *Selubung*, the admiration and regard for veteran stars of old Malay cinema in *Layar Lara*, and the loss of intrinsic worth and dignity in *Ringgit Kasorrga*. The manner in which pop songs are inserted in *Jalang* and *Black Widow*, however, does not reflect the panache and quality evident in the other films that greatly use songs but the songs in these two films also directly relate to the female protagonist's dilemma and her relationships.

The setting presented in these films clearly contributes to the expansion of the female protagonist's dilemmas and the thematic structure. The films that concentrate on the effects of modernity on the Malay woman enhance this theme by using the setting as the source of the heroine's educational, vocational and financial autonomy and aspirations and to project the dichotomy of *kampung* values versus and demands of city life, as particularly evident in the



films by Shuhaimi Baba (*Selubung*; *Ringgit Kasorrga*) and U-Wei (*Perempuan, Isteri & ...*; *Black Widow*). The cosmopolitan setting also plays a significant role in most of the other films to reveal the detrimental effects of modernity, as in *Anak Halal* and *Layar Lara* for instance. The urban venue reinforces the protagonist's lifestyle, as in *Gol & Gincu*, *Cinta, Sepi* and *Jalang*. The rural backdrop, however, contributes significantly to the depiction of powerful patriarchal doctrine as in *Perempuan, Isteri & ...*, *Buai Laju-Laju* and *Black Widow* in which female power is impeded and the woman is relegated to her domestic role and realm. The physical and social make-up of the *kampung* hinders the female protagonist from openly expressing her emotions or resolving her concerns through decisive actions.

One of the crucial components of melodrama is 'the pleasure of being touched and giving way to tears' (Neale, 1986, p. 6). And tears are an essential element in the melodramatic structure of Malay cinema – a feature inherited from the influence of Indian films. The selected films reveal that in most cases, the depiction of crying is connected to sorrow (as in *Muallaf*, *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, and *Sepi*), regret (as in *Sepet*, and *Layar Lara*) and remorse (as in *Jalang* and *Ringgit Kasorrga*) and almost always suggests feelings of helplessness or weakness in a character. The films, nevertheless, differ in their balance between the heroine's assertiveness and self-reliance, and her emotionalism and sensibility. Most of the heroines are not seen in countless tearful moments as if to suggest that a heroine who is frequently over-emotional compromises the depiction of her agency and assertiveness. In films that project a heightened sense of melodrama, however, pathos is produced through a 'liberal' *mise en scène* that balances points of view. The film audience is 'privileged' because of the access they possess to information that the character does not have. This is illustrated, for example, in *Layar Lara* when Auntie Zai shows signs of dementia; in *Anak Halal* when Inderaputera is oblivious that Hisyam is his father; in *Sepet* when Orked is unaware that Jason has been killed when she speaks to him; and in *Puteri Gunung Ledang* when Tuah is oblivious of Gusti Putri's presence and plans.

Finally, in keeping with Malay cinematic traditions, fate and destiny (*takdir*) prove to be the prevailing element that commonly marks a power over the lives of the protagonists. More often than not they are conveyed through the element of excess either by a character's extreme action or an overly intense occurrence in the plot. This makes certain moments in the various films more melodramatic and, therefore, either intensifies the pathos, by operating multiple viewpoints and thus making everyone a victim (Elsaesser, 1987) or creates a reverse effect whereby the spectator is turned-off and dismisses the overdramatic moment. This is evident, for instance, when Mastura is revived by the appearance of magical butterflies in her

hospital room in *Selubung*; when Atikah hallucinates and leaps off the high-rise flat in *Anak Halal*; when Orked has a phone conversation with Jason at the point when he has been killed in *Sepet*; when Dian dies after donating her kidney to Dhani in *Cinta*; when Sufi, Imaan and Adam are connected through the car accident in *Sepi*; when Mas Ayu dies giving birth to her illegitimate child in *Black Widow*; and when Maria struggles to get to the mosque to meet Ben in *Jalang*.

## Reflections

As a final note, I reflect on the limitations that this research has been subjected to which may or may not have a significant bearing on the conclusions of this thesis. Firstly, the film texts identified for analysis are a modest representation of films from the early 1990s to 2009 that provides a critical insight into the connection between the melodramatic mode and female representation in Malaysian-Malay cinema. Although I have selected films that collectively are a combination of box-office hits, critically acclaimed texts, as well as films that have generated interest in the Malaysian media (e.g.: *Puteri Gunung Ledang*; *Gol & Gincu*; *Sepi*; *Jalang*), there are evidently a number of other films from the time frame stipulated that may also contribute to the findings of this research. Secondly, due to the idea of a division between textual encoding and audience decoding (Hall, 1980), there exists the possibility of a multiplicity of readings of the selected films as there are limits to the openness or polysemic nature of any text. Textual analysis can therefore expound the parameters of possible readings with the aim of revealing a multitude of cultural and ideological aspects of these films. But such analyses would also be open to criticism of readings that are biased and incomplete (Kellner, 1995). My interpretation of the film texts is evidently narrowed down by the theoretical and contextual information relevant to melodrama based on both Western and Malay cinematic traditions, and by my worldview. And although reading and interpretation can be conducted in a multi-perspective manner, my conclusions in this research may or may not be the result preferred by audiences and other readers (who are themselves significantly defined by class, race, gender, ethnicity, ideologies, etc).

This research, furthermore, does not conduct a complete cultural studies analysis via the examination of how various audiences actually read films and attempt to uncover what effects they have on audience thought and behaviour. My analysis, as explained in the introduction, focuses primarily on the text as well as its cultural and ideological implications on the figure of the woman. The combination of textual and contextual approaches, while having the capacity to be powerfully explanatory, can also be unwieldy. It is, perhaps, beyond

my capacity to deal with all the factors necessary to fully comprehend the relationships reflected in any particular point in the history of each of the selected films. Although my discussion has mostly centred on the use of the melodramatic mode and on the depiction of female protagonists, my analysis nevertheless relies on the thematic structure and textual references in each film.

A final point that needs to be addressed pertains to the significance of the methodology. Employing a combination of Western and Malaysian cinematic influences to the selected films has expanded my knowledge on both the ‘universal’ and the ‘particular’ nature of film analysis. Western theory, nevertheless, does not examine the symbolic and historical/culture specific elements of the films and Malay cinema, like all cinemas, are rooted in the aesthetic framework of its specific culture and linguistic nuances. The application of Western theory is, however, useful in terms of interpreting the structure and formal features of a film text – ways of segmenting the narrative; identifying filmic techniques and stereotype protagonists. At the same time, I have learnt that the researcher needs to avoid universalising tendencies that may lead to reading these films purely according to the cultural and aesthetic standards of the West. Application of the methodology therefore needs to be continually sensitive to both social and cultural specificity.

Adopting a structuralist manner of locating meaning within the film text also, on occasion, makes it difficult to explain what is problematic about the meaning in the broader context of a film’s production and consumption. For instance, as this research takes on a feminist perspective, I have questioned whether it is the film text or the researcher that is being subversive, particularly in male-produced texts – are the films by U-Wei popular with feminists because the filmmaker gives it a feminist message or simply because it can be read ‘on behalf’ of feminism? Such interpretations seem to arise as a result of complex interaction between the researcher as spectator and the film text, and so it is vital to signal how this interaction is achieved at every stage of textual analysis.

The analysis and conclusions presented here are not definitive as no single approach can be exceptionally sufficient. Ultimately, it is hoped that this research contributes to the various means of examining cinematic representations of Malay women, and that the application of the conceptual framework has highlighted significant details about the portrayal of women in Malaysian-Malay films from the 1990s onwards. The melodramatic mode employed in the films exhibits and examines conflicts that stem from inequalities in class and gender, within and beyond the family, in the larger socio-economic sphere. Although it is this realm in which melodrama is criticised, it is also such issues as the ones depicted in the films

discussed that give melodrama its strength and importance. Examination of the melodramatic mode in this thesis confirms that Malay melodrama is not invariable and should be appreciated as an evolving entity that alters according to shifting historical and cultural circumstances. The films selected for this research depict Malay cinema as distinctively Malay and maintains the cinematic spirit that accentuates essential subject matters through visual pleasures. Cinemas beyond the Western sphere have been supplying new models of national cinemas, 'new wave' movements and auteurs. If Malaysian-Malay cinema is to become a legitimate subject of investigation, it needs to be included in the international scope of film studies, in order to assert and establish its legitimacy within the Asian cinematic realm.

## Appendix A: SYNOPSES OF SELECTED FILM TEXTS

### *Selubung* (1992)

*Selubung* tells the story of Mastura, who returns from studies abroad and joins the Malaysian workforce at a corporate level. While studying for a degree at the University of Western Australia, Mastura and her Malaysian student friends become interested in helping Palestinian refugees caught in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Mastura also experiences the loss of her friendship with her best friend EJ who chooses to follow the path of an Islamic extremist group led by Brother Musa, a former medical practitioner. EJ swiftly becomes the second wife of Brother Musa, who is already married to Hani, a non-practising doctor. Hani, who is afflicted by a mental disease after the loss of her baby, becomes increasingly jealous of EJ's relationship with Brother Musa, especially after the birth of their son. When EJ is ill and taken to the doctors, the insane Hani kills her baby. Although Mastura originally comes from a fishing village, she comfortably embraces her career and modern life, and becomes involved in voluntary work to fulfil her mission of promoting goodwill for society. Halim, who has had experiences working in the Middle East, supports Mastura's good intention and encourages her to join Rescaid, a volunteer organization focusing on helping victims of the Palestinian-Israeli war. She meets Dr. Sardar, a Jordanian who lost her family in the conflict, and who heads Rescaid operations in Kuala Lumpur. Dr. Sardar is impressed with Mastura's ethic and effort and believes that Mastura would be a suitable replacement to fill her post. In her workplace, Mastura meets and falls in love with Kamal, a divorcee who shares an interest in the work at Rescaid. Mastura and the team from Rescaid successfully organise a nation-wide charity concert to promote the plight of the refugees and raise funds. Their effort becomes the pride of the Rescaid organization until the branch experiences a bomb blast due to a terrorist attack. Mastura is badly injured but recovers and returns to Rescaid to continue with her charity work.

### *Perempuan, Isteri dan ...?* (1993)

The film commences with Zaleha, the female protagonist, rejecting the man chosen for her and eloping to southern Thailand with her lover on the day of her wedding. Zaleha is tracked down by her intended husband, Amir. When the unsuspecting newlyweds return to the hotel room they find Amir lying in wait for them. When confronted by Amir, Zaleha's husband chooses his own self-preservation over the safety of his wife. Amir shoots Zaleha's

new husband in cold blood and sells her to a Thai brothel. When he returns, some six months later, Zaleha is no longer the sexually innocent village girl. She anonymously tips off the religious authorities who find them staying in the same hotel room and apprehends them for *khalwat* (close proximity). Amir is forced to marry Zaleha and take her back to his village. When Zaleha first arrives at Amir's village, she assumes the role of his wife with enthusiasm but Amir pays no heed to her efforts. Zaleha then seeks recreation and attention by employing her sexuality. On a trip to a nearby town, she accepts an invitation from a truck driver and his friend to go to the cinema and engages in unseemly behaviour with him in the darkness of the cinema. Zaleha also uses her feminine charms to persuade Majid, a cloth seller, to allow her credit for the fabrics and accessories that she purchases from him. When Zaleha becomes weary of Amir's mistreatment, she employs the old Malay *nasi kangkang* (straddled rice) ritual, in effect a spell employed by women to regain control over straying husbands. Amir is affected by the spell and has a headache and suffers from fatigue the following day. The spell also appears to calm and domesticate Amir and even make him more attentive. The traditional spell is so effective that Zaleha is able to rebuff Amir's sexual overtures. Zaleha also engages in sexual relations with Tapa, the village simpleton who after having spied on her and observing Amir's cruelty, treats Zaleha with kindness when she is chased out of her house to search for salt to flavour her food, and hides with her behind a tree when Amir is spotted looking for her. As a result of her dalliance with Tapa, Zaleha is presented with the problem of his insatiable desire for her and is unable to be rid of him. When Amir arrives home, Amir confronts Tapa, who plaintively states that he wants Zaleha, Amir's rage is so great that even his brother, the god-fearing Halim, is unable to stop him. He grabs the machete out of Tapa's hands and kills him before turning his anger onto Zaleha with tragic consequences.

#### *Ringgit Kasorrga* (1995)

The plot revolves around the relationship between Nina and the characters at Blaze, a modelling agency owned by Meera Almeida, a seemingly unscrupulous and ambitious woman who is willing to do almost anything in her power in the pursuit of wealth and social status. Meera supplies models and dancers for various functions, particularly on the island resort of Kasorrga where the girls model and act as escorts and companions to rich businessmen for large sums of money. Meera is also having an affair with Datuk Shah, a married politician and businessman who appears to have business interests in Kasorrga and is portrayed as the villain in the story. Nina, however, returns home with a degree in hospitality management and secures an administrative position with Blaze. At Blaze, Nina is initially seen as an innocent

and straight-laced personality. She is a figure of fun, teased for her 'country' origins. Nina responds with a friendly and pleasant manner and proves herself to be an efficient and conscientious employee who cares for the well-being of her colleagues. Nina also attracts the attention of Khal, Meera's business partner and ex-boyfriend, who eventually expresses his interest in her. Nina ends up acting as their 'big sister' and even protector, confronting Meera about letting the models be exploited on Kasorrnga when she accidentally discovers the base goings-on at the resort. Meera, however, fails to elicit a concrete commitment from Datuk Shah. Meera is ultimately betrayed when she discovers videotapes in his apartment which document his sexual dalliances with other women on Kasorrnga. Realising that she has been betrayed, Meera confronts the politician about the sex tapes and threatens to expose him. When Meera comes to the realisation of her immoral ways and of Datuk Shah's true character, she tries to redeem herself by getting back at Datuk Shah. When Datuk Shah's cohorts visit her at her apartment she is accidentally stabbed and dies, but unbeknown to him she had taken steps to ensure that the incriminating tapes reaches Khal. Nina uncovers the truth about Datuk Shah's immoral activities and decides not to keep silent over what she perceives as wrongdoing. With Khal's help Nina attempts to expose Datuk Shah and the nefarious plans of his fellow businessmen. In the end, Datuk Shah escapes by offering to help the police with their investigation on Kasorrnga, and Nina and Khal decide to continue their business plans.

*Black Widow – Wajah Ayu (1994)*

Mas Ayu is a flight stewardess who enjoys the perks of her job and likes dating various men. These men meet untimely deaths. Her mother Aton tries to ensure that a sexual indiscretion in her youth does not bring bad luck to Ayu, who is the lovechild of Aton and Agus. Aton uses traditional methods to treat Ayu. Ayu eventually falls in love with two brothers, Imran and Jalil but becomes obliged to marry Jalil. On Ayu's wedding day, Aton realizes that Ayu loves Imran more than Jalil. Ayu is also involved in an abandoned project on building a medical clinic for her village. On the day of the clinic's official opening, a heavily pregnant Ayu goes into labour and dies giving birth to her lovechild with Imran.

*Layar Lara (1997)*

This film focuses on the lives of two Malay film actresses and highlights the effects of modernity on the Malaysian film industry. Ena Manjalara learns the meaning of respect and artistic devotion during the making of a Malay film on the effects of modernity on villagers

who wish to preserve their land for agriculture. Malik, the director, struggles in his attempt to fulfil his artistic objective and comply with the demands of the producers at the same time. Ena, whose commercial popularity lands her the main role, displays a *prima donna* attitude in her dealings with the film crew. She flirts with Daud, an extra and production assistant on the set, and fools him into thinking that she is attracted to him when all she wants is for him to be an errand boy and to make her boyfriend jealous. Ena's boyfriend is Shak, an egotistical musician, who dislikes her popularity and wants her to play the role of the trophy-girlfriend. Eventually, Ena's true passion for acting is stirred when she meets Seniwati Zai, or Auntie Zai as she is affectionately known, a former idol of the Malay silver screen from the 1950s. Auntie Zai is now destitute and sometimes shows signs of dementia. The old star is nevertheless fascinated with modern skyscrapers. Auntie Zai's last wish is to go to the top of the skyscraper near her house, and have one last starring role in a film. Daud, who is related to her, manages to get Malik to employ Auntie Zai and her fellow veteran stars to take on minor supporting roles in his film. As the film nears completion Ena is sacked when Malik could no longer tolerate her lies and tardiness. This causes Ena to take stock of her career and personal goals. She ends her relationship with Shak and begs Malik to reinstate her into the film, promising to completely change her ways and display a more professional attitude. Auntie Zai's condition deteriorates and she dies near the film's end. Her funeral is attended by not just the film crew but also by a multitude of loyal fans and fellow veteran stars.

*Buai Laju-Laju* (2004)

Amran is a drifter who arrives at eatery belonging to Ibrahim a rich older man married to a younger beautiful woman called Zaitun. The couple live in a house next to their restaurant where Zaitun works. Unable to pay for the food he has eaten, Amran agrees to do some manual tasks as payment. Zaitun flirts with Amran who ends up working and staying there. Zaitun eventually manipulates Amran and gets him involved in murdering her husband. After the murder, which they make to look like an automobile accident, someone blackmails them by sending pictures of them at the accident site. By then, Zaitun has transferred all of Ibrahim's property into her account. Fearing the police, Amran traces the sender – a photographer who he catches up with later in the town's gardens. After taking all the pictures and negatives, Amran asks Zaitun to run away with him. Zaitun agrees to run away that very night. Whilst driving Zaitun takes the wheel, a car passes and pushes them to the side that causes a punctured tyre. Amran jumps from the car but before Zaitun could also jump the car



explodes. Amran is sentenced to jail for the murder of Zaitun. At the end, Zaitun re-emerges from the bank into a luxury car which takes her to the airport.

*Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2004)

*Puteri Gunung Ledang* is set in the thriving 15th century Melaka Sultanate and the grand Javanese kingdom of Majapahit. Gusti Putri Retno Dumillah, a Princess of the Majapahit Kingdom, has fallen deeply in love with one of Melaka's most respected warriors, Hang Tuah. A vivid dream compels the Princess to leave her assigned palace life and set sail for Melaka with the hope that she can be reunited with her true love. Soon after the Princess's departure, the Majapahit Kingdom is attacked by the powerful Javanese Kingdom of Demak. Desperate to stop the invasion, Gusti Putri's brother and King, Gusti Adipati Handaya Ningrat initiates a plan to offer his sister's hand in marriage to the Prince of Demak. Her absence renders this solution impossible and so, the King's only hope for security is to forge an alliance with the mighty Melaka Sultanate by offering his sister's hand in marriage to Sultan Mahmud Shah of Melaka. The Sultan accepts but the Princess is unable to bring herself to comply as she could not bear to be his Queen in the same court as Tuah. The Princess instead offers to marry the Prince of Demak, but the indignant Sultan will not accept rejection nor will he be publicly humiliated. Hang Tuah is therefore ordered to head the royal delegation and propose to Gusti Putri on behalf of the Sultan. The Princess attempts to curtail their advance, but eventually she yields to Tuah's appeal. Broken-hearted, the Princess agrees to marry the Sultan on the proviso that he is able to solve and fulfil seven riddles.<sup>132</sup> When he is about to fulfil the final request of his own son's blood the Princess magically appears in the royal court and chastises the Sultan on his selfish and egotistical nature. Angered by her actions, the Sultan casts a curse upon the Princess and banishes her to Mount Ledang for the rest of her life. The curse dictates that anyone who sets eyes upon her would vomit blood till it kills them. Upon learning of the course of events between the Princess and the Sultan, Tuah rushes after the Princess in an attempt to be with the woman he loves before the curse takes effect.

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<sup>132</sup> A bridge made of pure gold from Melaka to Mount Ledang; another bridge made of silver from Mount Ledang to Melaka; seventrays of the hearts of mosquitoes; seven trays of the hearts of germs; seven jars of the juice of young betel nuts (betel nuts have no juice); seven jars of the tears of virgins; one bowl of blood from the Sultan's only son.

*Sepet* (2005)

*Sepet* is a love story about two young individuals from different cultural and religious background. Orked, a young Malay Muslim girl befriends Jason, a Chinese boy who sells pirated DVDs and CDs. The two begin dating at a fast food chain and quickly fall in love. However, Orked's Malay friends – Lin, Izwan and Johari – are not comfortable with their inter-racial relationship. As a result, Orked faces criticism over her 'slit-eyed' partner. Orked and Jason continue with their liason and Orked gets to know Jason's best friend Keong who soon develops a more positive attitude towards the Malay race. Having done well in her national exams Orked is given the opportunity to further her studies in England. In the meantime, Jason is forced to get involved with the local triad master's sister in order for his family and Keong's mother to be spared of trouble from the gangsters. When the girl gets pregnant, Jason writes Orked a letter explaining that he has to take responsibility for his actions. Orked is broken-hearted at his decision and severs all ties with him even when the pregnancy is terminated and Jason persistently attempts to approach her. In the final scenes, Orked leaves for the airport, bound for England when she thinks of Jason and decides to contact him. At the same time, Jason is rushing to the airport on his motorbike across the busy roads of Ipoh when he meets with a fatal accident. Although the audience is made aware of the accident and Jason's body is lying on the street, Orked is featured having a conversation with him over the phone where he says that he would wait for her.

*Gol & Gincu* (2005)

Putri, a girly college student majoring in fashion design, gets involved in the game of futsal in order to win back her ex-boyfriend, Eddy. She experiences prejudice and ridicule, but finds friendship and camaraderie in the members of her futsal team who each have issues of their own. Putri gradually finds within herself the strength and values of a true winner, and attracts the attention of Eddy and Reza. When Eddy wants to reconcile with Putri she rejects him and chooses to be in a relationship with Reza who is supportive and kind.

*Gubra* (2006)

Orked (from *Sepet*) is now married to Arif. When they rush to the hospital to visit Orked's father who has collapsed as a result of a diabetic attack, Orked meets Alan, brother of the late Jason. He is helping his mother who is tending to his father who has also been admitted to the same hospital. Orked is drawn to Alan when she discovers Arif cheating on her. In a parallel plot set in another part of the same town, Maz and Li (a religious couple)

have a cordial relationship with their next-door neighbours, Temah and Kiah, who work as prostitutes. Temah is diagnosed with HIV/Aids. Maz and Kiah decide to look after Temah's son if anything unfortunate happens to her. Ki, her son's father, comes back and steals money from Temah and Kiah.

*Cinta* (2006)

The film comprises four sub-plots. Rubiah (Mak Bi), a widowed restaurant owner, befriends Cikgu Elyas an elderly, retired school teacher who suffers from Alzheimer's and lives with his grandson Amin. Elyas is often seen wandering about the city looking lost. Rubiah eventually makes the decision to look after Elyas who is about to be sent to a home when his grandson is no longer able to cope with his care.

Rubiah's employee Arianna, who arrives in the capital city in search of boyfriend Khalif who has made her pregnant, befriends and obtains help from Taufik, a lonesome, mild-mannered journalist who falls in love with her at first sight. Taufik helps Arianna with posting an advertisement to locate Khalil, and offers her accommodation at his humble dwellings. When Arianna discovers that Khalif is dating a colleague she rejects him when he returns to her and chooses Taufik instead.

Rubiah's customer Harris is an architect who cannot accept that his wife Airin has left him for another man. Their daughter, who is in her custody, helps him regain his confidence and get over his wife.

His friend Azlan, who is the owner/editor/writer of a magazine, falls in love with bookstore assistant Azura but cannot publicly admit that he loves her. When Azura leaves Azlan he realises his mistake and goes after her and makes a public marriage proposal in a train.

Harris's colleague Dian wants her younger brother, street artist Dhani, to obtain a stable job even though he is happy with his life. When Dhani falls ill due to kidney complications Dian donates her but does not survive the operation. At her funeral Dhani reads a letter from Dian who reminds him of the value and importance of love which brings happiness.

*Anak Halal* (2007)

Hisham, is a criminal who entrusts the care of his baby son to the eccentric Mariam, when he is arrested and put in prison. Mariam raises the boy Inderaputera (Putera) in dire circumstances. They live next to Mak Leha and her daughter Johanna (Jo) in a squatter area of

Kelang. Putera is parted with Mariam when she is taken away by the police. Putera ends up living with Jo and her mother and they later move to a low cost high-rise flat in Kuala Lumpur. Jo, a tomboy, secretly falls for Putera when they become young adults. Putera works at a garage and he and Jo spend a lot of time with friends at Erzan's stall under one of the city's viaducts. Erzan and his younger sister Milya are good friends of Jo and Putera. Erzan owes a lot of money to a local drug pusher Tajul who harrases Erzan when he is unable to repay the debt in full. Putera also befriends Atikah, a rich businessman's daughter, who seeks comfort and camaraderie from Putera and his friends. Atikah becomes Putera's girlfriend but she is also a drug addict. Atikah runs away from home and is unable to relieve herself of drugs. In a moment of hallucination, Atikah jumps from the rooftop of the flats and dies. Erzan, meanwhile, is shot by Tajul's henchmen. Unable to curtail his anger and frustration, Putera goes after Tajul and his men but runs into Mariam and Hisyam. Putera only discovers that Hisyam is his father after having shot Hisyam. Putera and JO attempt to run away with Mariam but is stoppoed by the police.

#### *Mukhsin (2007)*

*Mukhsin* is the final instalment of the Orked films and goes back in time to 1993 when Orked is 10 years old and living in a small village with her parents. Orked is a tomboy who prefers to play robust games with the boys rather than engage in more feminine activities with the girls. Orked enjoys a close and loving relationship with her open-minded parents and their housekeeper Yam. During the school holidays, 12-year old Mukhsin arrives at the village to stay with his aunt when there is turmoil in hi own family. Orked and Mukhsin become close friends but their friendship becomes awkward, especially for Mukhsin, when he develops feelings for Orked. As a result of a misunderstanding, Orked refuses to speak to Mukhsin who tries to regain her friendship. When Mukhsin's mother dies he has to return home but makes a kite for Orked as a sign of goodbye before he leaves the village. When Orked finds out that Mukhsin is leaving she runs after him but is too late.

#### *Sepi (2008)*

The film comprises three separate plots that are connected through the element of fate. Adam is a successful young chef who has yet to find true love. He is always relegated to the singles tables at wedding receptions and finds that all his friends find their perfect partners while he attracts the wrong kind of women like Suzy. He then meets and falls in love with Ilyana who is about to enter into an arranged marriage. Adam gets engaged to Suzy but breaks

it off when Ilyanna returns to tell him that she was unable to go ahead with her wedding. Adam goes after Ilyana to stop her from leaving for Australia and finds a happy ending.

Sufi, the owner of a shoe factory, does long-distance jogging every day in an attempt to outrun the guilt he harbours because he was unable to save his wife in an accident. He goes into deep depression and literally runs away from life until the day he meets and eventually falls in love with Marya. Marya, who is married, is unhappy as she and her husband have been waiting to conceive a child for a very long time. She falls in love with Sufi but chooses to remain with her husband when she discovers that she is pregnant with his child. They part and Marya returns to their favourite spot many years later when her husband has passed on. She meets Sufi's son Ashraf who tells her that Sufi too has passed away.

Imaan is a young college student who has written a play based on a poem that she had written entitled 'sepi'. She gets the attention of Ian who wishes to act in her play but is confused by Imaan's behaviour and loyalty to her boyfriend Khalil who has died after a stabbing incident. Imaan's grief is so profound that she imagines Khalil and speaks to him as though he was still alive. When Imaan is knocked down by Sufi's car and goes into a coma the truth about Khalil is made clear. Imaan eventually regains consciousness and becomes Ian's girlfriend after enjoying success with her play.

#### *Muallaf (2009)*

Ani and her younger sister Ana escape to Ipoh, away from their cruel and abusive father in Kuala Lumpur. They stay in an empty bungalow belonging to their late mother's colleague and friend. Ani works as a waitress in a pub until she is able to claim the inheritance her late mother has set aside for her. She plans to take Ana to Singapore and further her studies in theology. Ani becomes friends with Brian who is fascinated by the sisters' religious piety, and is made to confront his resentment about his Christian faith. When Ana is kidnapped by her father, Ani goes after her sister and eventually stays to look after her father who has suffered a stroke. In a phone conversation with Brian, she urges him to improve his relationship with his mother.

#### *Jalang (2009)*

Maria is a business consultant who exchanges sexual favours for business deals. She is used by various wealthy businessmen to acquire profitable business contracts. Ben Adam is Maria's reliable friend and confidante, secretly in love with her. When Maria reconnects with ex-boyfriend and lost love Ikram, she decides to end her decadent lifestyle. Ikram's father,

one of the businessmen who used Maria's services, reveals the truth about Maria to Ikram. He severs ties with Maria leaving her heartbroken. She returns to her village and takes steps towards repentance after Ben reveals his love and acceptance of Maria. Maria is also secretly followed by Ali, a mentally unstable thug hired by Puan Sri to keep tabs on Maria's liaison with her husband. Maria and Ben make a pact to lead a more pious life when Maria decides to become his girlfriend. They decide to meet for pre-dawn prayers at the mosque. On the very same night Ali breaks into Maria's apartment and brutally rapes her. The next morning Maria drags herself to the mosque only to die in Ben's arms before she could enter the mosque and perform her prayers.

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